

IS THERE JOURNALISM WITHOUT DEMOCRACY?
NORMATIVE ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF JOURNALISTS
IN AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

IS THERE JOURNALISM WITHOUT DEMOCRACY? NORMATIVE ROLE
CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF JOURNALISTS IN AN AUTOCRATIC
REGIME

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to call for a more inclusive interpretation of journalism and investigate how journalists in non-democratic regimes conceptualize normative journalistic roles and describe and rationalize their institutional roles and daily reporting practices. This study used in-depth interviews with news practitioners and media experts from Belarus to show how journalists negotiate boundaries of their work and provide journalistic service within limits imposed on their autonomy. The findings of the study support the argument that political regimes should not be equated with mass media systems and that democracy is not a pre-existing condition for journalism. Journalists in non-democratic countries have similar understandings of normative roles as their colleagues in democratic nations. News practitioners from state-run and independent news organizations in Belarus work to overcome restraints on their autonomy to provide reporting that serves the interests of their audiences, facilitates dialogue between social groups, and contributes to the wellbeing of society. News workers in autocratic regimes are often expanding boundaries of press freedom with civic courage by reporting critically of government policies and by willingly taking risks when public interests are at stake. In addition, certain restrictions led to a more disciplined professional culture of journalists as thorough fact-checking is necessary to avoid penalties.

Chapter 1. Introduction

“We went to several workshops for journalists, and during one trip to Paris we met with some European officials. And it was clear that they have no idea how Belarusian journalists work... They think there is a dictatorship, and that’s it... There was one European official, I don’t remember his name... When he entered the room, he said something like: “Hello, I cannot greet you as journalists because there is no journalism in a dictatorship.” So, he declared we are not journalists. And this happens everywhere in foreign countries where we go. I hope with time they will understand that this is not just black and white...”¹

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? 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 intends to explore.

Until recently, institutional roles of journalists have been studied mostly in democratic nations, with roles of journalism and journalists in the society being described by scholars from either a normative perspective or by presenting surveys on how journalists perceive their roles (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Curran, 2005; Schudson, 2008 among others). Comparative analyses allowed scholars to introduce conceptual models of ways journalism works in different socio-political systems while comparative empirical surveys provided an understanding of the range of roles journalists perceive to be important in different countries. However, there are still

¹ From an interview with a Belarusian journalist.

questions remaining about the impact of socio-political structures on journalism and journalistic roles in non-democratic countries, and how what we know at this point might be helpful or not in understanding how mass media operate in such regimes. 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).

In thinking about normative journalistic roles, it is essential to overcome western bias and predetermined framing in journalism studies to go beyond an understanding of a journalistic normativity as singular (Nerone, 2013). Instead, it is important to understand a potential multiplicity of normative approaches (Zelizer, 2009). This also means that “interpretive paradigms need to be tailored to local situations rather than imported uncritically and misapplied” (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 14). Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation project is to explore and provide a better understanding of how journalists in non-democratic regimes conceptualize normative journalistic roles and how they describe and rationalize their actual institutional roles and daily reporting practices in a non-free media environment that is characterized by high level of state involvement. For the actual institutional roles, this study is particularly interested in the dimensions of interventionism, power distance, and market orientation (Hanitzsch, 2007).

In-depth interviews with journalists from Belarus provide a fine-grained account of the ways they negotiate boundaries of their work and provide journalistic service within limits imposed on their autonomy. Theoretically, this helps build conceptual

understanding of the gap between normative expectations and actual journalistic practices and reveal what roles journalists in non-democratic countries consider important.

The secondary goal of this project is to shed light on some aspects of state-run mass media functioning in autocratic regimes. More specifically, I interviewed journalists employed at state-run Belarusian media to document their accounts on journalistic roles and practices, both normative and actual. Building on the existing scholarly literature on state-run media in authoritarian regimes, this study intends to expand the vision of such media as being completely deprived of their agency to act independently and being used as a tactic of rule. Specifically, the study provides insight on how journalists from state-run media see their news organizations and themselves fulfilling certain roles within the society, how they rationalize their practices and negotiate them not only with their supervisors or editors, but with their own understanding of normative orientations, or what they think they should do and what they know they can do within the set boundaries.

The goal of this study is to move forward from scholarship that equates political regimes with mass media systems and instead to explore and expose the complexity of processes within mass media systems in non-democratic regimes.

This study uses qualitative interviewing, one of the fundamental methods for learning about the experiences of others, to explore personal experiences, practices, and opinions of Belarusian journalists (Weiss, 1994). Qualitative interviewing as a research method documents rich accounts of experiences, knowledge, and ideas (Alvesson, 2011), which is of utmost importance for this research project.

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 and Way, 2010). Today the socio-political context in Belarus is characterized by lack of plurality, a weak civil society and private sector (Miazhevich, 2007). The government extends its ideological control over the public sphere and all institutions of socialization, such as schools and universities. In 2017, Freedom House assigned Belarus a score of 83 out of 100 on the scale from 0 (best) to 100 (worst) and rated it as Not Free for 2016, with eight-points improvement from the previous year².

Today, the state has a monopoly on printing, subscription, distribution, and broadcasting services, owns socio-political print outlets with the largest circulations as well as TV and radio stations with the largest share of audience. The government has adopted policies, such as legal and economic pressure or politicized registration and licensing of mass media outlets, to limit activities of non-state press (BAJ, 2014). Journalists working for state-run media have to navigate within the boundaries of approved topics and personalities, and their work is often a subject of direct editorial involvement of the government offices. Studying experiences of Belarusian journalists represents an exceptional opportunity to provide an insight into reporters' normative

² Each country and territory is evaluated according to three categories (the legal environment, the political environment, and the economic environment) and is assigned a total press freedom score from 0 (best) to 100 (worst). The countries are then divided into three groups: Free (with a total score of 0 to 30), Partly Free (with a score from 31 to 60) and Not Free (61 to 100). (Freedom of the Press 2017 Methodology: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press-2017-methodology/>).

orientations and everyday practices. My background and experience of working as a journalist for independent and state-run newspapers in Belarus helped me be cognizant and responsive to the reporters' accounts and enriched my research with deeper understanding and appreciation of what they tell.

To situate this study in a broader context and trace how comparative journalism studies has sought to include non-Western mass media systems into the models and classifications of different ways mass media operate around the world, I begin by describing the literature on normative theories of the media and news media and democracy. Journalism cultures and professional journalistic roles are the next important areas of scholarly work that are reviewed in this paper. Finally, after the discussion of the literature on the roles of mass media in authoritarian regimes, I describe the socio-political context of Belarusian mass media and present my research questions.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Normative Theories of the Media

During the early communication research era in the U.S., political scientists studied normative roles of the press, or how the press ought to operate to sustain political order, democracy in particular (Zelizer, 2011). The landmark work “Four Theories of the Press” (1956) by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm is considered to be the first comprehensive attempt to conduct a systematic normative analysis of how the press operates in various social and political environments. The authors argued that social and political structures influence the form press systems take. They explained the logic and functioning of the press according to four systems, or theories: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet communist. “Four Theories of the Press” was later criticized for its inherent ideological bias and the theoretical framework being shaped by Cold War mentality and industrial capitalism (Nerone, 1995). The fundamental conceptual problem is that the authors suggested not four theories but one, liberal democratic, with four examples explained through the prism of libertarianism (Nerone, 1995). Another, more recent critique by Szpunar (2012), argued that “Four Theories,” along with other scholarly works such as *Media, Messages and Men* by Merrill and Lowenstein (1979), used the frame of “Other” as a point of reference to define the libertarian/liberal ideal of the press. Szpunar (2012) questioned the usefulness of ideal types and typographies in studying current complex mass media systems. In particular, it is argued that the mass media systems of Central and Eastern Europe vary a lot and are too complex to be evaluated by one set of normative principles.

Another important part of discussion of the roles of mass media in democracy was the work of the Hutchins Commission (1947), which addressed important critiques and challenges the U.S. press was facing at that time. The commission criticized a commercial press system and the resulting threats to democratic governance and outlined guiding principles of the social responsibility of the press. However, because of particular historic and political contingencies, such as war, a capitalist market-driven society orientation, and an existing dichotomy of state control vs. private tyranny, the commissioners failed to provide critical recommendations for meaningful reforms or suggest policies or structural changes that would address criticism of capitalist profit-oriented media systems and encourage systemic changes (Pickard, 2010).

One of the most comprehensive works on normative theories by Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) presented a framework of normative theories of the media based on three levels of analysis: normative orientations on a philosophical level, types of democracies on a political level, and roles of mass media on a media level. At the philosophical level, there are four normative traditions with basic principles: corporatist, libertarian, social responsibility, and citizen participation. The authors presented characteristics of normative theory by elaborating on fundamental issues, moral foundations, major actors, and functions of normative theory of communication. The principles and practices of four models of democracy – administrative, pluralist, civic, and direct – are described at the political level. Finally, four roles of media in democracy – monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative – are presented in contemporary context.

The monitorial role, according to Christians et al. (2009), means “collecting and publishing information of interest to audiences, as well as distributing information on behalf of sources and clients that include governments, commercial advertisers, and private individuals” (p. 30). The term “monitorial” itself includes the functions of providing intelligence, advice, warning, and other information of general utility. The facilitative role describes a relationship of the news media with civil society that draws on principles of social responsibility theory and on the idea of the press being a fourth estate that supports public debate, participation, and decision making. The radical role of media in democracy “focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 126). It is assumed that news media serve as a platform for voices that are critical of authority and established order, hence, support fundamental change and reform in society. Finally, according to Christians et al. (2009), the collaborative role means mass media support civil or military authorities in defense of the national interests and social order against threats of crime, war, terrorism, or natural disasters. It also assumes that news media support development of their respective nations.

Depending on normative orientation and type of democracy, aspects of each role can become more or less prominent. For example, the monitorial role of the media is particularly important for a pluralist democracy and is more fragmented in civic and direct models, while the facilitative role is more important for civic and direct democracies. The radical role is described as prominent in pluralist and civic models of democracy, and the collaborative role is especially important for the administrative model (Christians et al., 2009).

Similarly, Baker (2002) described roles of the media in liberal pluralism, republican, and complex democracies. In a liberal pluralist democracy, mass media are segmented and partisan, socially responsible, and may serve an advocacy role for different groups and institutions, with a watchdog role being one of the most important. For a republican democracy, news media are reflective and discursive, inclusive in the pursuit of a common good, civil, balanced, and comprehensive and expected to facilitate discussion and collaboration among various groups of the society. Complex democracy, in its turn, calls for both a partisan segmented press and discourses aimed at agreement on a common good facilitated by a society-wide press. The two normative orientations of journalists that Baker (2002) describes are social responsibility and public journalism. The normative orientations of the social responsibility model reflect elitist rather than participant principles of democratic governing. Mass media takes on a paternalistic role of imposing and clarifying social values and facilitating decision-making by elites, which can lead to a sense of powerlessness among the rest of the citizens. The public journalism model stresses the importance of participatory roles of citizens, deliberation, and common interests. As Baker (2002) argues, it is better suited to fulfill the facilitative role of civic discussion, involvement of the community in decision-making, and developing people's self-concepts and understanding their interests.

One of the first attempts to systematically study mass media systems, or models of media and politics, was Hallin and Mancini's "Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics" (2004). The work focused on Western democratic media systems and suggested three models: Mediterranean, or Polarized Pluralist; Central and North European, or Democratic Corporatist; and North Atlantic, or Liberal. Four factors

were used to define the models, (1) development and structure of the media market; (2) political parallelism, or to the extent the media field reflects the country's main political structures; (3) the development of journalistic professionalism, including levels of autonomy, professional codes, and journalistic organizations; and (4) the role of the state, or the degree and nature of intervention and regulation. Hallin and Mancini later edited "Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World" (2012), which looked beyond Western countries and suggested new ways to define mass media systems in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. International scholars, such as Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska (2012) and Aukse Balčytienė (2012), proposed using hybrid models of media and politics while trying to locate their countries within the initial range of models. It was suggested that additional important factors influence the formation of mass media systems in some parts of the world, such as the national security culture, protection of national languages and identities, cultural traditions, types of commercialization and professionalization, and historical conditions.

This overview of the normative theories of media shows that scholars connect types of socio-political systems with the ways media are expected to operate. Although the normative roles and orientations of journalism described in this section mostly belong to democratic libertarian tradition, the range and diversity of those roles allow the establishment of various normative role orientations that become prominent under certain political circumstances, such as the type of democracy, extent of political parallelism, or nature of state involvement. This literature also sets a background for exploration of normative roles of journalists in non-democratic environments, which, it is reasonable to expect, will vary similarly to journalistic roles in democracies. The roles of mass media

in autocratic regimes are discussed later in this study. For now, it is important to describe what democratic tasks of the media were defined in the literature as most prominent and how the concept of democracy itself is discussed in relation to journalistic practices around the world.

News Media and Democracy

For the specific primary democratic tasks of the media, scholarly literature identifies the following four tasks: to inform, scrutinize, debate, and represent (Curran, 2005). In more detail, Schudson (2008) described the following seven functions of journalism in a democracy: information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, provision of a public forum, mobilization, and promotion of representative democracy.

Scholars of journalism studies highlight a particular importance of looking not at how the media should serve democracy, but the actual pragmatic performance of such normative expectations (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009). A criticism of the actual practices of performing normative roles, such as a watchdog role, was voiced, among others, by Bennett and Serrin (2005). They argued that the watchdog role of journalism has been weakly institutionalized in daily routines and responsibilities of the press and is characterized by a hybrid of deference to authorities and ritualistic antagonism. Commercial pressures, understaffed newsrooms, lack of time, increasing conglomeration, and an unsupportive public are among the reasons the press failed to perform a watchdog role (Bennett & Serrin, 2005).

While 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) called 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). 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” (Zelizer, 2013, pp. 466-467). The inappropriate application of Western standards and a hegemonic normative model of journalism, combined with the ignoring of normative aspects of journalism in other countries, was also criticized by Nerone (2013): “Beyond the stupid normativity that automatically condemns as authoritarian any medium or journalist that lacks what western hegemonic journalism has declared to be real independence, there remains much in the normative culture of the press that might support journalists in difficult situations” (p. 456).

The argument for broadening a comparative perspective of media studies was put forward by James Curran and Myung-Jin Park in their book *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (2000). The authors focus on national media systems and argue that they “are shaped not merely by national regulatory regimes and national audience preferences, but by a complex ensemble of social relations that have taken shape in national contexts” (p. 12). 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 non-democratic to democratic. However, as time and studies have illustrated, this is not the case for many countries where a “transition” phase became a

permanent state. Political scientists argued, therefore, that this transition paradigm should be discarded (Carothers, 2002).

One of the strong voices in this debate addressed the question of “How much democracy does journalism need?” in the article with the same name by Josephi (2013) who argued that journalists should not be equated with the governments of the countries where they work and journalism should not be limited to journalistic practices only in democratic regimes. Democracy is not a pre-condition for journalism, and journalists in non-democratic and semi-democratic regimes can provide journalistic service to their audiences by using good news judgment and reporting verified and accurate information. In other words, journalistic orientations and practices of journalists should define journalism, not the types of regimes. There is, of course, a difference in how journalists in non-democratic regimes are able to fulfill these roles. As Josephi (2013) acknowledged, in semi-democratic and non-democratic countries journalists have to balance and negotiate their relative autonomy from power and seek to provide service that reflects their orientations and role conceptions. Importantly, some of these orientations and role conceptions are quite similar to the ones of journalists in democratic countries. For example, the study by Hanitzsch et al. (2011) that mapped journalism cultures across nations showed that some principles, such as detachment, non-involvement, presenting information on important political processes, and monitoring government, were perceived as important across all regime types. Interventionism, however, was more important in developing societies and transitional democracies.

Another factor that justifies the importance of exploration of journalistic practices in democratic and non-democratic countries is what Josephi (2013) described as

ownership-dependency in both types of regimes, dependency on private media owners in democracies and dependency on government offices in autocracies. Also, a continuity of journalistic workforce was demonstrated, for example, during and after the regime change in Portugal and Spain, which suggests normative orientations of journalists in non-democratic regimes are not entirely different.

This study does not disregard the concept of democracy but suggests a more inclusive interpretation of journalism, which is essential for understanding journalistic role conceptions and practices in non-democratic environments. Political factors are especially relevant to journalists' perceptions of media roles, and journalists who have to manage in a political climate that is relatively hostile to press freedom and democracy do exhibit smaller power distance (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). A study by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) showed that journalists perceived political and economic factors to have the most influence on their autonomy. Importantly, perceived political influences were related to indicators of political freedom and ownership structures, which were measured by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy, Freedom of the Press by Freedom House, and the Economic Freedom of the World Index by the Fraser Institute. The study reports, "national indicators of democratic performance, press freedom, and political parallelism are strongly related to the journalists' perceived levels of political influences" (p. 418). Also, in the countries where journalists experience substantial political constraints, political influences "also have implications for the individual level of the journalists, even though these conditions operate at the systemic level" (p. 418). This means that democratic/non-democratic dichotomy does not necessarily have to be discarded, but that specific practices of journalists should not be equated with non-

democratic regimes and measured using normative roles of Western contexts. In this light, this study aims to explore both normative role orientations and specific practices of journalists without imposing pre-established standards or expectations. Instead, it intends to analyze journalism culture by describing specific practices as explained by journalists themselves. The next section looks at how scholars conceptualized journalism culture and what factors showed to influence journalists' institutional roles in comparative empirical studies.

Empirical Studies of Journalism Cultures and Professional Roles

Apart from theorizing about the normative roles of journalism in democracy, scholars of journalism studies explored orientations of journalism focusing on other aspects as well. According to Blumler and Cushion (2014), such approaches 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. Finally, journalistic roles and orientations is another area of inquiry, where, for example, the Worlds of Journalism Study project comparatively looks at differences in journalism cultures in various countries of the world. As part of that project, the study by Hanitzsch et al. (2011) “mapped” journalism cultures around the world by conducting a comparative survey of the role perceptions, epistemological orientations, and ethical views of journalists from 18 countries. Three broad types of journalism cultures were identified: Western journalism, peripheral Western, and journalism of developing countries and transitional democracies. The authors argued that political factors need further exploration as they have a significant impact on levels of interventionism and power

distance, hence, autonomy of journalists. Another study that was based on the Worlds of Journalism Study project (Hanitzsch, 2011) described the journalistic field as a space of struggle between distinct professional milieus. The author identified four global milieus that “become manifest in the shape of groups of journalists who share similar professional views” and “cut across organizational and national boundaries” (p. 480). They were: populist disseminator, detached watchdog, critical change agent, and opportunist facilitator. These comprehensive large-scale comparative analyses improve the understanding of differences in journalistic roles’ perceptions around the world and describe the range of factors that are considered to be important.

Journalism cultures of individuals are shaped by their education, professional experience, editorial policies, and the journalism culture of the country they live in (Van Dalen, De Vreese and Albak, 2012). Perception of professional roles impacts the behavior of journalists and the news content which they produce (Donsbach, 2008). According to Hanitzsch (2007), “journalism culture becomes manifest in the way journalists think and act; it can be defined as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” (p. 369). The author outlined three constituents of journalism culture: institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies. This study explores the perceptions of normative roles of Belarusian journalists. It also explores how they describe and rationalize their actual institutional roles according to the three dimensions: interventionism, or “the extent to which journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values” (p. 372); power

distance, or a journalist's position toward power in society; and market orientation as "the primary social focus that guides news production" (p. 374).

This dissertation studies journalists' normative orientations and their journalistic practices in an attempt to correlate journalists' beliefs and orientations with their actual practices, which is one of the important questions scholars of journalism need to pursue (Loffelholz and Weaver, 2008). The importance of exploring this gap was among others highlighted by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) who looked at journalists' perceptions of influences on their work and argued that it is important to explain how those perceptions become "real" in journalistic practices. Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) made a step toward it by measuring the perceived subjective influences on journalists' autonomy together with objective factors, such as ownership of the media. Van Dalen and colleagues (2012) studied role perceptions of political journalists in Germany, Denmark, the UK, and Spain, and analyzed news content produced by the same journalists. They found that the differences in role conceptions were reflected in the reporting style of political news and that journalistic orientations varied more between than within countries and that those orientations shaped news content that the surveyed political journalists produced. 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. The authors 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 in the organization are a stronger predictor of role enactment than role conceptions.

In their recent work, Hanitzsch and Vos (2016) conceptualized journalistic roles as discursive constructs of journalism's identity and place in society. They argue that journalists exercise important roles in two domains: political life and everyday life. Within the political domain, the authors identified roles that address six essential needs: informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, developmental-educative, and collaborative-facilitative. In the everyday domain were three areas: consumption, identity, and emotion. Because of the hierarchy of societal values reflected in normative roles, journalistic roles in the domain of political life have more discursive power than the roles that address everyday life, which are under articulated and understudied and therefore reflect the biases of western scholarship in normative journalistic traditions.

Because the goal of this study is to explore professional roles of journalists overall, the respondents were directed to address roles in the domains of political and everyday life. By that, two goals were accomplished. First, this gave the respondents an opportunity to explore the whole range of normative roles. Second, this clarified how journalists rationalize their journalistic service within the boundaries of a non-democratic environment. As established in this subsection, the actual institutional roles of journalists are explored according to the three dimensions: interventionism, power distance, and market orientation. In the next section, I provide an overview of how these and other aspects of mass media functioning in non-democratic regimes were addressed in the literature.

Mass Media and Authoritarian Regimes

Although mass media in authoritarian regimes received a certain amount of attention in scholarly research, there have been no comprehensive studies of the variation in roles, practices, and mechanisms of news media, especially state-run news media, functioning in non-democratic regimes. What follows next is the overview of scholarly literature on the mass media in authoritarian regimes, with a particular attention to functions of mass media, factors that impact policies and regulations of media employed by autocratic rulers, and some of the characteristics of news coverage

The normative role of the press for earlier European authoritarian regimes was control over the society with a more effective administration for the purpose of maintaining the established political order (McNair, 2009). Restrictive licensing, in addition to libel and copyright laws, were used to control information and minimize its destabilizing effect. With the development of new forms of news media, the range of those roles, however, expanded.

Quite often, the use of mass media has been 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 and Orttung, 2014). Today, 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; post-production 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).

Still, viewing the role of mass media in authoritarian regimes as purely propagandistic tools would be an oversimplification. Recent studies have shown that many political, economic, and societal factors need to be considered to adequately describe and understand such roles. To fully comprehend how news media operate in non-democratic environments, it is useful to conceptualize freedom of mass media on a continuum rather than using a free-not free binary. In this way, the degree of relative autonomy of journalists and levels of state intervention could provide a more fine-grained explanation of how mass media operate in particular environments. In this light, the mass media in non-democratic regimes should not be automatically labeled “unfree” but their functioning should be analyzed in all its complexity and interrelation with other factors. As the literature shows, some current autocratic regimes tolerate existence of both state-run and commercial media that serve as a source of more diverse information (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu, 2014). According to Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009), resource-poor dictatorships may allow freer media as a tool for control of government effectiveness. In this way, regimes balance “the trade-off between allowing for free or partially free media in order to provide proper incentives to subordinates and censorship that limits citizens’ ability to overcome coordination problems in organizing a revolt” (p. 645). In other words, mass media may serve as checkers on bureaucracy and help a ruler or ruling party be efficient in governing.

China under the communist regime has received probably the most attention of scholars who looked at different aspects of mass media in non-democratic regimes. After the establishment of the communist regime, the mass media system in China largely followed the Soviet model, according to which, news outlets were considered a “mouthpiece” of the Party. Between the 1980s and 1990s, mass media in China experienced a period of transformation and diversification when rapid development followed post-Mao’s market-oriented socioeconomic reforms (Huang, 2001). Today, the country has one of the most dynamic media markets in the world. 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. This was described by Walker and Orttung (2014) as a “quasi-commercial media environment in which the party-state retains a dominant editorial hand” (p. 73).

Because elimination of collective action potential is one of the goals of autocratic regimes, mass media and tools for their regulation are widely used. In a large-scale, multiple-source analysis of censoring of 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). Similarly, this goal was identified in the analysis of the coverage of an event called the Revolution through Social Networks in 2011 in Belarus (Karaliova, 2013). In the early stages of the protests, the state-run Belarusian newspapers

employed the strategy of exclusion of the event from political discourse by ignoring it entirely; they shifted to the strategies of attack and delegitimization in later coverage of the protests.

Another important role of state-run mass media in autocracies is to discredit and marginalize alternative political movements and actors (Walker and Orttung, 2014). In this regard, censorship and self-censorship serve as a “filter” that only allows “approved” facts and actors to appear in the news media. Another purpose of the state-run media in autocracies is to eliminate criticism of the regimes and legitimize incumbents. This is done by exclusively favorable coverage of regimes and policies, absence of critique, and depiction 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 anti-revolutionary rhetoric, and nationalism (Prekevicius, 2005; Miazhevich, 2007; Walker and Orttung, 2014).

The role of foreign media outlets in democratization in authoritarian regimes showed to be complex and multidirectional. According to the study by Kern and Hainmueller (2009), after being exposed to foreign media, East Germans appeared to be more supportive of the communist regime. The authors found that, contrary to expectations, East Germans viewed West German television as a source of entertainment, or as an escape from life under communism, not as a source of alternative information that could undermine authoritarianism. In contrast, according to Manaev (2009), a survey conducted in Belarus showed that the audiences of Western TV channels had more pro-democratic beliefs than the audiences of Russian TV channels available in Belarus.

However, the direction of causality in this relationship is hard to establish: do the audiences have pro-democratic views because they watch Western TV or do they watch Western TV because they have pro-democratic views? Despite optimism about the Internet and its democratization power (Castells, 2012), skeptics, such as Morozov (2011), argued that celebrants and techno-determinists do not take into account the use of the Internet by authoritarian regimes for surveillance, control, and manipulation.

In terms of news coverage, the coexistence of state-run mass media together with independent media (i.e. not subsidized by the government) can lead to a major ideological “gap” between the two types of media 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 state-run and independent Belarusian media constructed two distinct realities of the event (Karaliova, 2013). State-run media favored a pro-government perspective, never quoted protesters, and represented them as a detached and dangerous group of people; independent media presented more diverse voices and criticized violent suppression by the police. Similarly, in their study that looked at how state-run, independent, and social media covered uprisings in Egypt, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) found that three types of news outlets (state-run, semiofficial, and independent newspapers) told completely different stories about the same historical events by choosing different frames to portray protestors, causes and consequences of the events, as well as proposed solutions.

The literature on mass media in non-democratic 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 practices in this study should be explored by posing questions and gathering detailed accounts that would provide an understanding of specific practices in a particular socio-political system. But before these questions are formulated, some specifics of the Belarusian mass media system are described in the next section.

Belarusian Mass Media

In Belarus, the state has a monopoly on subscription, distribution and broadcasting services, owns the main broadcast media and newspapers, and has adopted policies that limit the activities of the non-state press (Klaskouski, 2011). Government control over news media is enforced through libel law, politicized registration and licensing of mass media outlets, and a variety of economic pressure. Since the 1990s, mass media in the country has been characterized by the coexistence of two major forms of mass media: (1) state-run media, which constitute the majority of socio-political print outlets, TV, and radio stations, and (2) independent media. These two types have led to the emergence of two different journalistic settings including two distinct associations of journalists (Jarolimek, 2009).

Speaking about development and the structure of the media system, one can note that 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, met with their colleagues in Europe and implemented newly obtained knowledge and skills by establishing news media that did not exist before, like

quality business newspapers or feminist magazines. At the same time, similarly to other post-communist countries, a relatively high degree of institutional continuity was observed in public spheres in Belarus, including the system of education and the media (Sparks, 2010).

After this brief period of democratization in the early 1990s, authoritarian rule consolidated under the first, and so far the only, elected president and proved its sustainability with the support of cheap energy from Russia. According to Levitsky and Way (2002), in the late 1990s, Belarus transitioned from competitive authoritarianism to a full-scale authoritarian regime. Today there are almost no alternative centers of political power in Belarus; political parties are small and almost powerless; and although elections are still being held, political competition is not meaningful (Levitsky and Way, 2010). The main principles of democracy, such as bargaining between incumbents and opposition, as well as the institutionalized uncertainty of political competition, are very rarely applied to political processes in the country (Schmitter and Karl, 1991).

With increased coercive capacity, powerful internal security apparatus, reestablished central control over local governments, and concentration of energy and property in state hands, Belarusians appeared to be in a situation where no form of disobedience or resistance was possible (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Today the socio-political context in Belarus is characterized by the lack of plurality and public involvement, a weak civil society and private sector, and an image of alleged conformity that is enforced by tight control of the public sphere (Miazhevich, 2007; Jarolimek, 2009; Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Because of the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and the inability of many news media 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 news media.

The role of the state and the degree of intervention in mass media regulation is dominant in both economic and political aspects. State-run media receive subsidies in many forms, including allocation of advertising, and have moderate to minimal profit motivations, while government offices have direct editorial impact on news content by sending memos with instructions or calling editors directly (BAJ, 2017). Under legal and economic pressure, independent newspapers can hardly compete with state-run media in terms of circulation and audience reach and often struggle for survival. Broadcast media are also predominantly state-run, with some commercial broadcast media that are either entertainment-oriented or have very small audiences. 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.

The government exercises extensive control including mass media laws which are ambiguous and sometimes interpreted in a way that would help silent dissenting voices. 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 (BAJ, 2017). New laws have been enforced in the past two years to regulate Internet news media as well. The news content in state-run media is almost exclusively favorable of government offices and the status quo in general. Almost no

critical reporting appears in state-run news media, and the main sources for news stories are government officials (Miazhevich, 2007; Jarolimek, 2009).

This brief description of the socio-political context and Belarusian mass media system helps clarify some specific circumstances that journalists work in. Because this project is focused on how journalists in non-democratic environments conceptualize their normative roles, the first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1. How do journalists from a non-democratic regime conceptualize normative roles of journalism in the society?

The existence of non-state mass media and the independent professional association of journalists along with state-run media and the “approved” union of journalists in Belarus suggest that actual institutional roles and practices will be described differently by journalists from the two media environments. To explore these roles, the second research question asks:

RQ2. How do journalists describe their actual professional roles and practices?

Because the goal of this project is to analyze institutional roles in terms of interventionism, power distance, and market orientations, the second research question is split into three sub-questions:

RQ2a. How do journalists describe their professional roles and practices in terms of interventionism?

RQ2b. How do journalists describe their professional roles and practices in terms of power distance?

RQ2c. How do journalists describe their professional roles and practices in terms of market orientation?

Finally, to explore how journalists negotiate the boundaries of their work and provide journalistic service within limits imposed on their autonomy, the third research question is as follows:

RQ3. How do journalists from a non-democratic regime rationalize their daily practices within the boundaries of constraints on their activity?

Chapter 3. Methodology

Data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews with Belarusian journalists to explore how journalists in non-democratic regimes perceive and conceptualize normative journalistic roles and how they describe and rationalize their actual roles and reporting practices. According to Carter and Bolden (2012), the research interview is one way through which professional culture is “interactionally accomplished” and “becomes a topic of inquiry, something to be accomplished and theorized by participants” (p. 258). Specifically, the participant and the interviewer work together to construct social meanings and define cultural identities by articulating cultural practices as sets of routines. In this sense, journalism culture could be activated and reconstructed in the discussion of specific orientations, beliefs, and practices of journalists.

Qualitative interviews focus on the meaning of shared experiences or opinions, with researchers aiming for “thick description” and deep understanding of processes and experiences (Brennen, 2012). Qualitative interviewing as a research method documents rich accounts of experiences, knowledge, and ideas (Alvesson, 2011). In-depth interviews develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, and describe processes, or “grasp a situation from the inside” (Weiss, 1994, p. 10). It is also valuable in providing access to an individual’s descriptions of experiences in their own terms, thus giving an opportunity to explore various discourses spoken by participants in particular settings (Tanggaard, 2009).

Theoretical assumptions researchers make about the interview as a research method largely define the purpose and research questions, different ways to conduct interviews, the role of the interviewer, the ways data is interpreted, and how quality and rigor of data is ensured (Roulston, 2010). This study utilizes a constructionist, or active, interview approach, according to which knowledge during the interview is co-constructed by interviewer and interviewee to generate situated accounts (Roulston, 2010; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Specifically, interviews are reality-constructing, meaning-making opportunities, where respondents are viewed not as passive “vessels of answers” but as active subjects who collaborate with the interviewer to construct knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 7). The interviewer helps a respondent activate his/her stock of knowledge and shift their narrative positions. The object of study then is both “what” and “how” the interview data are co-constructed.

A reflective pragmatism view on the interview suggests that researchers need to be reflective and explore multiple and contrasting meanings, challenge chosen interpretations, acknowledge ambiguity, and make modest claims about their findings (Alvesson, 2011). In this sense, several techniques of interview interventions could be helpful, including shifting perspective, changing vocabulary, and coming back to a particular theme. Another important implication for interview research practice suggested by the reflective-pragmatic approach (Alvesson, 2011) is the use of supplementary interviews with people from other than the main group, which helps to ensure diversity of possible interpretations and to explore alternative explanations. For this project then, in addition to interviewing journalists, or “a sample of representatives,” “knowledgeable informants” were interviewed (Weiss, 1994, p. 17) to acquire various perspectives and

explore alternative explanations (Weiss, 1994; Alvesson, 2011). The “panel of knowledgeable informants,” or experts, included media critics, professors of journalism, and media law experts from Belarus. 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. In addition, these interviews allowed for the exploration of a broader spectrum of concepts and explanations. In cases when media experts were also journalists, the experts weighed in on the topics which all other news practitioners were asked.

Apart from the use of supplementary interviews, it is also important to explore the social roles and identities of a participant, or activate aspects of their stock of knowledge, what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) called shifting “narrative positions” (p. 34) of interviewees by asking the respondents what they would do or expect if they were in a different role. For this project, journalists were asked about their actions and opinions if they were chief editors or readers of the news media they work for.

To activate specific professional cultures of respondents, according to Carter and Bolden (2012), it is important to place culture at the center of the discussion and ask about routine activities and group structures and negotiate subject positions. Culture, then, “serves as a narrative resource, something that is available for use in the construction of identities, the explanations of beliefs and practices, and the production of stories of experiences” (p. 266). In this study, it was addressed in a group of questions about the normative roles of journalists and their actual performed roles and practices

within newsrooms. During the interviews, examples and the exchange of details were encouraged.

Logistics and Sampling

The issue of choosing a place to conduct an interview, Herzog (2012) argues, is not a technical matter but an important consideration, as it plays a role in how respondents choose to construct their answers. To help researchers reflect on the impact of location, Herzog (2012) suggests thinking of how the cultural meaning of the place might interact with the meaning-making of participants during the interview. He also suggests thinking of how interviewer and interviewee engage in a dialogue to discuss the choice and meaning of the place when they set the interview. Because of the cost of a project that requires fieldwork in Belarus, interviews were done both face-to-face and via Skype depending on participants' preferences regarding the communication method or their availability during fieldwork time in Belarus. Using both methods helped provide a variety and richness of obtained data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a public place, like a coffee shop. According to James and Busher (2012), synchronous interviews over the Internet are quite similar to face-to-face interviewing and can provide a high level of participant involvement.

The question of sampling for the interview and for qualitative research overall does not have a clear "one size fits all" answer. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest thinking in terms of theoretical saturation when a researcher keeps interviewing until new respondents provide no new perspectives that haven't been expressed by other participants. The authors also encourage thinking in terms of multiple identities of participants or their narrative perspectives, not only in terms of "bodies." The interviewer

helped participants “activate” other roles, such as news consumer, or an imaginative role of an editor.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the project. This was an effective way of sampling for two reasons. First, my professional background of working as a journalist in independent and state-run 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 is a certain level of risk both for a researcher and participants involved in this project, discretion and caution were used when contacting journalists and setting up interviews. Surprisingly, in most cases, journalists agreed to be interviewed. Recruiting participants for the study stopped at the point of thematical saturation with repetitive descriptions of roles, practices, and rationalizations.

The participants for this study were news reporters and editors who work for daily mainstream newspapers and online media in Minsk. These people are referred to as ‘journalists,’ meaning the people who are employed at a news organization full-time and participate in editorial work, mainly by reporting, writing, and editing. The ‘panel of knowledgeable informants,’ or experts, consisted of media critics, journalism professors, and media law experts from Belarus. In total, 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 10 respondents from state-run news outlets and nine journalists from independent ones were interviewed. The sample included 13 female respondents and 13 male respondents of 24 to 66 years old. In this study, the names of news organizations were not reported to

minimize any potential risks for respondents. In addition, some of the characteristics of participants such as gender and specifics of their work that could potentially reveal their identities were randomized or concealed to maintain confidentiality. The overall number of news organizations was 12.

The interviews took from about one hour to one hour and a half each. At the end of the interview, respondents were asked for their permission to contact them later in case more detailed explanations or additional examples were needed to better understand their points.

The recruitment and interviews were conducted in Russian or Belarusian languages depending on the preference of the interviewees. The questions and consent forms were translated into both Russian and Belarusian languages beforehand. According to the requirements of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri, minimal risk studies require that the consent forms be translated by any individual fluent in a target language. To avoid misinterpretation and eliminate or minimize potential loss or change of meaning during translation of questions, the main strategy was to avoid vague and complex concepts or terms and use instead very specific questions and ask for examples that would help reveal the exact meaning.

In-depth interviews with Belarusian journalists explored how reporters define the main roles of journalists and journalism in society, how they make news decisions about what to cover, how they negotiate their autonomy while selecting topics and sources, how they determine if a particular topic would be suitable or rejected, what considerations they make in terms of access to sources and information, and how they rationalize their practices overall. The detailed instrument is provided in Appendix.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to Brennen (2012), interpretation of an interview begins during the interview as the researcher needs to work constantly to verify and clarify any of his/her initial interpretations. According to Alvesson (2011), constant reflexivity and questioning of interpretations is essential in interview-based research when any initial interpretations should be critically analyzed and questioned.

Because the object of study in an active interview is both “what” and “how” the interview data are co-constructed, data is analyzed both for structural and topical features. It means that for this project, interviews were transcribed in detail in order to analyze how data are co-constructed by speakers both in terms of themes and structure (the “whats” and the “hows” described above), such as certain conversational characteristics, for example, pauses and turn-taking.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety and then analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis using the following stages as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967):

1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category (or coding data incidents into as many categories as possible while constantly comparing incidents coded into the same category). The three basic types of coding research were employed for this study: open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

2) Integrating categories and their properties (at this stage, “the constant comparative units change from comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that resulted from initial comparisons of incidents” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 108);

3) Delimiting the theory (as the process of coding continues, the original number of categories is reduced or collapsed, and the categories become theoretically saturated);

4) Writing the theory (at this stage, the researcher works on building theory using coded data and a series of memos that provide content and examples behind each category).

Generalizability is achieved through processes of integration, reflection, and abstraction that are important during the entire research project.

For the structural features of the interviews, attention was paid to the vocabulary respondents used and how they phrased their responses. In this sense, Tanggaard (2009) considered the interview as a dialogical context for the production of multivoiced narratives and suggested viewing the interview as an opportunity to investigate such multivoicedness with a particular attention to multiplicity of discourses produced by a participant. The central focus of the interview then is not a static self but diverse discursive repertoires people reproduce in specific social settings, which are observed and registered by careful description of interactions and tensions. Moreover, it is important to understand the origins of discourses that are reproduced during the interview and if there are any potential opposing discourses. For this project, it meant paying attention to how journalists described normative roles and their performance of roles and whether any of these discourses were dominant or counter-discourses. Also of interest is the observation of how the respondents appropriate or avoid the vocabulary that is usually used to describe journalistic roles and norms in Western democratic media environments (such as watchdog function, social responsibility, objectivity, etc.) or the words that are used by press freedom organizations (such as censorship, harassment, press freedom, etc.). The

appropriation or avoidance of such vocabulary helps trace the origins of the produced discourses and offers better understanding of respondents' accounts.

Findings

Chapter 4. Conceptualization of Normative Roles

Question [Q]: What are the main roles of journalism and journalists in society?

Answer [A]: If we take Belarus, this is going to be a theoretical question rather than practical. The role of journalism is to serve as a representative of the society for the purpose of gathering information, providing information, and helping members of the society make informed decisions. Unfortunately, this is not quite right for Belarus. The real role of journalism differs quite a lot.³

This chapter reports on how Belarusian journalists describe normative roles of journalism in the society as well as if and how journalists working for state-run and independent media differ in such descriptions. The respondents were asked the following questions regarding their understanding of normative roles:

1. How would you define the main roles of journalism in the society?
2. In your opinion, what are the three most important roles of journalists?
3. Thinking again about the three most important roles of journalists you described before, do you think your colleagues from other Belarusian news media share your opinion on that?

On several occasions, journalists referred to the roles they named earlier in the conversations to describe how their specific practices helped fulfill those roles. Notably, when asked about roles of journalism and journalists in society, some interviewees inquired if that meant journalistic roles in general or journalistic roles in Belarus. After sharing their conceptualization of the normative, or “ideal” roles, many of the

³ From an interview with a media expert and journalist.

respondents also told which of these roles in their opinion were impossible or almost impossible to fulfill for various reasons in their country.

Journalists also shared their understanding of how their colleagues who work for state-run and independent news organizations viewed professional roles, thereby expressing beliefs about other members of the journalistic community in Belarus. Quite often these responses led to discussions about what it means to be a journalist or what roles are critical for journalists to be considered legitimate professionals. Although a more detailed account on different aspects of the journalistic community in Belarus will be reported in later chapters, some of the ideas described here will be helpful in setting the background for further conversation.

The report on normative roles was structured according to the two domains where journalists exercise their roles according to Hanitzsch and Vos (2016): the domain of political life and the domain of everyday life. The roles are listed according to their prominence, or how many interviewees named them and how important they thought the roles were overall. Where possible, the roles are labeled using the respondents' vocabulary, since this allows a better understanding of the origins of discourse reproduced by the journalists and gets at nuanced differences in the meanings.

Domain of Political Life

In the domain of political life, the most prominent roles listed by the respondents were the role of providing information, educational role, watchdog role, providing commentary, and serving as mouthpiece. A mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, the role of providing a tribune for public discussion/dialogue, and promotion of democratic values were mentioned in fewer interviews.

Providing information. Providing information to the audience was by far the most often named role. Importantly, journalists often spoke about journalistic norms important for this role, such as objectivity, pluralism, truthfulness, impartiality, and balanced reporting. A journalist from an independent news organization said:

First, the main role of journalism in the society is to inform people. Foremost, it is providing objective and balanced information that allows people to make decisions and draw conclusions so that members of the society could make decisions on their own how they want to live and evolve.

In normative terms, the role of informing is important as it provides the society with tools necessary for decision-making and, hence, improvement of people's lives. This discursive strategy of journalists empowering their audiences with knowledge for their own good reappeared several times in the description of other roles as well, such as the educational role, watchdog role, and providing commentary.

Talking about specificity of this role in Belarus, another journalist working for an independent news organization noted that in a democratic society, providing information would be the most important role of journalists, but this is not the case for Belarus, where the roles of mediator and public control became more important. Another aspect of this role was described by a news reporter who spoke about the absence of balanced information and pluralism in Belarusian mass media:

On Belarusian television, there are no oppositional candidates to parliament. There are no 'undesirable' people, [no people] who do not agree with the politics of the government. Even if we take an example of Svetlana Alexievich⁴, who was never covered on any state-run TV channel after winning the Nobel Prize. This shows that the state does not need Alexievich as a critic of the regime.... And this big number of state-run media and the fact that the main TV channels are state-run, it says that those in power do not like being criticized.

⁴ Svetlana Alexievich is a Belarusian non-fiction writer and the winner of the 2015 Nobel prize in literature.

Although journalists working for both state-run and independent media agreed on the importance of providing information, some respondents emphasized a more active role of reporters in doing so. Providing objective information and diverse opinions, according to one respondent working for an independent news organization, is a journalist's "job and duty," even if someone, like "an official, a propagandistic machine or another stakeholder," is trying to distort it. This is an example of a politicization discursive strategy, or description of a normative role using terms of political struggle, to legitimize this function as an essential part of political life in the society.

Educational role. An educational role of journalism, as described by the respondents, included such functions as education, enlightenment, improvement of legal awareness, and moral education. For example, one journalist spoke about explanatory journalism and the importance of explaining complicated issues by organizing hotlines and having Q&A sections on their website. Another journalist working for a state-run newspaper emphasized the goal of improving legal awareness of audiences, particularly regarding knowledge of readers about their consumer rights. In this sense, she said, journalists serve as actors protecting consumers from unfair practices of businesses. Here and later, the educational role was described as legitimate because journalists represent the public interests, thus enabling fairness in the society.

Moral education or, as one journalist put it, "making people better," was a prominent idea discussed by the respondents. This function, according to one interviewee, includes "education, improvement of moral principles, testing those principles by some theoretical situations, provoking a person to evaluate some events and other people's behavior, to think critically, to develop higher standards and more noble

standards of behavior.” This moral education, another respondent said, could be fulfilled by showing “ideal” people and their behavior in news:

There was a news on some Russian TV channel about a policeman who gave his gloves to some girl and his jacket to some guy during a snow storm. The policeman got frostbite and lost fingers on his left hand. Therefore, this news turned to be both a piece of information and also some kind of moral education.

Some respondents acknowledged problems with how journalism fulfills this role by saying that most of the news items reported by journalists are not concerned with important aspects of people’s lives but, as one journalist said, serve “more to entertain and shock rather than educate and improve people.” This example demonstrates the normative character of the educational role that is used to evaluate journalism as being useful for the improvement of the society.

On the other side, another news reporter from an independent news organization delegitimized the role of moral education by discursively shifting responsibility from journalists to the public. In particular, that respondent did not believe that journalism had to fulfill the role of moral education at all:

Maybe many people that I know will tell about this educational function – to bring up and educate a new person, a democrat sharing European values. I don’t think journalism has to “bring up” anyone. This is some kind of a Soviet slogan: to bring up. But there are people who think this way, who say “this bloody regime” and so on. And these are people who think that journalism is a speaker for change and for revolution, and that we need to awake the people, to fuel people’s anger, and to call people to revolt.... I don’t think this is the goal of journalism. I think journalism should be a platform for opinions and that people need to decide what to do on their own.

This opinion hints about the division over how news workers view their actual roles and practices regarding interventionism in the journalistic community in Belarus, even among the journalists working for independent mass media.

Watchdog role, journalism as fourth estate, and help in solving problems.

While both journalists working for state-run and independent media spoke about the first two roles in almost all interviews, a watchdog role (as well as a conception of journalism as a fourth estate) was described mainly by journalists working for independent news organizations and only mentioned by journalists working for state-run news organizations on very few occasions. In such cases, respondents either spoke about a modified version of the role as “helping people solve their problems” or journalists being “representatives of the people” and “socially responsible.”

A watchdog role of journalism as conceptualized by respondents included several aspects defining journalism's functions and specifics of role enactment in Belarus. Several journalists working for independent news organizations and one journalist working for a state-run media said they supported the concept of journalism as a fourth estate (literal translation from the Russian language – “fourth power”). In the words of one respondent, journalism as a fourth power serves as “an independent public institution that controls the state, on one hand, and impacts moral beliefs of citizens, on another hand.”

The watchdog function is especially important in Belarus, said another reporter from an independent news organization:

In situations when other parts of the system of checks and balances, other branches of the government, do not fulfill their functions, when there is a predominant branch of government in totalitarian countries, and in our case it is executive branch, or, more precisely, presidential institution; then parliaments and courts do not fulfill their functions of checks and balances for that government.

Here and elsewhere, journalists used the discursive strategy of dramatization to highlight the importance of the watchdog role in the society, and in the Belarusian society in

particular. This was also observed in the following example when another journalist from an independent news organization, while also expressing her belief about the importance of the watchdog role for Belarusian journalists, said it is not *because* of the type of regime but *despite* the type of regime that the role should be exercised:

I support the idea of journalism as a fourth estate and I think that even in a harshest dictatorship it could be put in practice. Of course, sometimes we have to step on our own song's throat, such as for example, limit ourselves in certain social benefits, in having a 'decent' work at a government institution, in a salary or in some comfortable environment of editorial office or something like that. But this is important.

On few occasions, journalists also recognized that it is not only government officials that journalists need to keep accountable but also those in power in a broader sense, such as business owners or top clergy.

Some journalists, especially journalists from state-run media that are not supposed to be critical of government, avoided using terms such as "watchdog," "keeping accountable," or "criticizing" but spoke instead about how news reporters often help solve people's problems and represent their interests, or, as one respondent put it, "defend people's interest when they are powerless in dealing with government officials." In those responses, journalists were again described as representatives of the public's interests who facilitate fairness and help improve the lives of people, which helped legitimize a modified version of the watchdog role for state-run media.

One journalist noted that news workers often help solve problems "if not directly then by calling attention of the society to it." This function of serving as a mediator between the people and the government is described in the further subsection on a mediator role. The origin of this "help in solving problems" function and the reason it

was so prominent in journalists' responses could be explained by the existing bureaucratic system of government that is characterized by the lack of transparency and accountability.⁵ For example, one journalist working for an independent news organization said:

On the other side, for the society this [news media] is one of the last opportunities to be heard because officials in our country still react to buzz in the media and do not like it. Therefore, they try to solve some problems preventively. And the experience of my news organization among others showed many times that a popular mass medium could help make real change. I am not talking about politics, this is harder of course, but about some smaller problems...

Several respondents noted that in Belarus, the watchdog role is quite often underperformed, especially in state-run media that refrain from any critique of the government or only provide an "approved" type or amount of such critique because of the fear of retaliation. Interestingly, one of the respondents, a faculty member at a journalism department, explained that because of changing media environment and the blurring line between journalists and audiences, news reporters are losing their influence, which leads to underperformance of the controlling function of the press. Here, the responsibility for underperformance was discursively shifted from journalists to forces they cannot control, which served as an attempt to normalize the current situation and delegitimize the watchdog role.

Commentary and public opinion formation. Commentary was another prominent role described by the respondents. Commentary together with public opinion

⁵ According to the Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, Belarus received a score of 40 on the scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) and was among the countries and territories "where citizens face the tangible impact of corruption on a daily basis," including "untrustworthy and badly functioning public institutions like the police and judiciary," as well as bribery and indifference of authorities. (Source: http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016)

formation were more often mentioned by journalists working for state-run media than by those working for independent media. Several respondents acknowledged a growing importance in today's media environment of providing the public with analysis of events and said that commentary allows news media to create a certain picture of the world.

Some interviewees assigned a somewhat paternalistic role to journalists providing commentary. For example, one journalist was describing the role of providing analysis of current events and facts as an "attempt to rise above the crowd, meaning not only to protect the people but also to guide them if they are confused...." Another news reporter described journalists as possessors of certain particular knowledge that they share with a public that "doesn't know or doesn't want to know" about certain complex issues. These two examples illustrate how journalists discursively enabled news workers as agents protecting the people for their own good. Ultimately, as explained by the respondents, commentary helps to form public opinion and helps people reach certain logical conclusions. So, one news reporter said:

My ideal and my belief is that the role of a journalist, speaking formally, is to help form a certain stance on something. In textbooks, it's called public opinion but I call it attitude toward life or help in forming such attitudes in life and toward what is happening.

Another respondent noted that commentary and "creating a certain picture of the world, a certain view of events, and a certain information picture" is a function not of a 'taken journalist' but of a "mass media as a sphere of public activity in general." Quite often, journalists were talking about a type of commentary with a stronger persuasive or, as they described it, ideological component, which is discussed further in the subsection on an ideological/propagandistic role.

Mouthpiece role and legitimization of power. The mouthpiece role, although never openly labeled this way, was mentioned mostly by journalists from state-run news organizations. Communication of government stances on different issues is essential in the society, said one journalist, otherwise “the position of government offices becomes unclear.” That respondent also said: “there could be different rumors about some important projects in the society, and if there is no official position and no official comments about it, then the rumors will grow and grow... which could be quite destructive.” This example shows how the mouthpiece role is legitimized as an important normative role that helps prevent rumors. This same journalist stressed the importance of covering the president, government, and parliament, because, as he said, this is the direct responsibility of their department at the newspaper.

However, some journalists were not sure if serving as a mouthpiece for government by covering events of various public offices could be considered a role of journalism as such and if it is all that essential, especially in the scope in which it currently exists at their news organizations. One journalist from a state-run newspaper said:

I don't know if this could be called a role... Of course, we cover lots of events and activities [organized by governmental offices]. But these news stories do not actually fulfill any educational role and do not help form any opinion. They are just news stories that could as well not be written at all... I know, this event happened; so what? In half a year, it might as well be put together again...

When talking later in the interviews about the changes they would want to make at their news media, many journalists said that they actually want less of these “official” dry

news stories⁶ because they are not interesting to anyone and all look the same. This type of discourse served not only to delegitimize the mouthpiece role but also to acknowledge its superficial character.

Another aspect of serving as a mouthpiece for the government, namely legitimization of power, was described by a journalist working for an independent news organization when he spoke about the roles state-run media fulfil in the society:

State-run mass media do not control power. They legitimize power... When officials enforce another clearly unfair tax, then independent mass media defend people's interests and report on why this tax is bad and why it should not exist or how people's rights and the constitution are violated. And state-run media provide commentary by officials that allows a spin in such a way that it shows how this law is fair and we need it.

In this example, a journalist denied a normative character of the role of legitimization of power and, furthermore, highlighted the potential damage for the society this role could make.

A similar message about power legitimization, but this time with a completely opposite connotation, was shared by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who said one of the important roles is to "lead [the public] to a certain way of thinking, to explain some processes" and shared an example:

...simple situation: increase in prices. It always leads to the society's resentment. But we [journalists] could explain it and show that it might have been worse and for now prices are increased, but they are not as high as they could have been. It is important both for the state and for the society that people understand that. This allows to avoid certain problems and prevent public discontent.

⁶ Several respondents used a slang term "offitsioz" to describe this type of news about government offices that is often characterized by very dry formal language and lack of diversity in terms of form or topic.

That respondent said that as journalists working for a state-run newspaper, they must serve as agents between the public and the state to help avoid tension. In this way, the legitimization of power role was justified and presented as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society. Other respondents named this mediator role as an important one as well.

Mediator role. Journalists serve as mediators between people and authorities and provide opportunities for dialogue. Journalism in this sense is “a bridge between those in power and people because it allows people to reach out to an official directly and ask some questions,” said one journalist working for an independent news organization. Another journalist said that journalism also creates an opportunity for feedback: “When powerful people make decisions and journalists cover how the society reacts, they provide an opportunity for feedback and coordination of actions.” This idea of mass media, in particular independent news organizations, serving as an institution that allows the feedback from people to be heard, was supported by another respondent who said that it is extremely important in societies where “it is very hard to know what people think without fair and balanced elections.” Therefore, news media serve as a “last communication channel between the society and the government.”

Although the mediator role was also mentioned by journalists working for state-run media, it was described as encompassing some other goals, such as dialogue facilitation and reconciliation between social groups, not just the government and the people. In this sense, journalists often assume a more active role as conciliators. For example, one journalist said that he always tried to seek ways to “solve people’s problems” by reaching out to officials first and allowing them to respond or offer a

solution before writing any news story. In this way, he avoided criticizing officials while also fulfilling the mediator role. He said: “Many people say that a journalist should be on the people’s side. But I see that in the government, there are people as well.” Similarly, another journalist from a state-run newspaper said that he does not approve of adversarial questioning of officials in interviews: “I am his [an official’s] friend and helper on air, because I am a journalist. ... I am a bridge between the society and that official, but I can help him to figure it out and give a response, although it’s his response.” This journalist also expressed his frustration with how independent media, as he said, often attack government officials even when such attacks are not justified. By presenting an alternative view on how journalists should position themselves regarding government officials, i.e. not as adversaries but as colleagues, journalists from state-run media were able to legitimize the mediator role and explain why it is important and good for the society.

Ideological and propagandistic roles. Ideological and propagandistic roles were described in three types of responses: when journalists working for independent news organizations were talking about state-run media; when journalists working for state-run media denied playing such roles; and when journalists working for state-run media acknowledged it.

In the first case, respondents said that state-run media often play a propagandistic role, or work as a PR service for government. When doing so, one interviewee said, they “do not cover issues unfavorable for the government.” And, as another journalist said, this propagandistic role is very easily identified in news stories in state-run media:

There are obvious ‘flash mobs’ in state-run media when you can definitely tell they received an order... For example, [when they were told] to interview delegates of the Belarusian assembly about prosperity of Belarus. This is ridiculous when in all news media the same people tell [the same things].”

In this way, journalists from independent news media delegitimized the ideological role by labeling it ‘propaganda,’ or ‘PR,’ or by highlighting the factitious character of news coverage.

Some journalists working for state-run media either denied or did not name the ideological and propagandistic roles as notable for their work. For example, answering the question about the three most important roles of journalists in the society, one news reporter said: “I would definitely not name [a journalist] an ideologist. If this is what you are hinting about.” This quote is one example of how some respondents presumably made assumptions about the interviewer’s views and how they positioned themselves regarding such assumed views.

At the same time, some other journalists working for state-run media did in fact acknowledge the existence of the ideological role. One respondent, for example, said that state-run news media serve as providers of state ideology and viewpoints and are needed in the society as “an element of national security” that helps keep the society within certain boundaries. Another news reporter described the role while expressing his obvious frustration and struggling to articulate the role in normative terms:

For example, now I work for a state-run newspaper and we represent the interests of the government. Like when X [name of the government official] told us to write about things that would distract people from their everyday problems. So it’s probably an ideological role... If they would tell us to mislead readers then we would try to mislead readers. This is some kind of unhealthy role... I don’t know how to name it, I don’t know...

Notably, another interviewee who also acknowledged the importance of an ideological role of journalism, normalized such a notion by expressing his belief that this role is inherent for all mass media, including ones in other countries. This discursive strategy of normalizing the role, while making it appear to be globally acceptable and needed to preserve the national security, helped present it as legitimate.

Tribune for public discussion/dialogue. As a tribune for public discussion and dialogue, mass media must provide an opportunity for public deliberation regarding issues that are important for the society. According to one journalist from an independent news organization, news media need to provide a platform for community members to speak about issues that are significant for them. The journalist shared an example of how their organization is doing that in a series of news stories devoted to certain problems or questions. This discursive strategy of empowering the public with deliberation opportunities highlighted the normative side of the role.

Another respondent emphasized the importance of journalists becoming a part of public discussion and facilitating an interactive dialogue with audience members: “Today a journalist is more included in this public discussion than ever before His goal is to recognize the audience he is working for, to communicate with it in an interactive mode, online, using new media platforms.”

One more aspect of serving as a tribune for public discussion was emphasized by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who spoke about newspaper columns with letters from readers. She then compared this function of journalism to a pressure-relief valve in a boiler:

This function is not simply important for the society. How do I phrase this... You know, it allows anger to come out like in a boiler with a pressure-relief valve. This valve allows steam to come out and prevent an explosion. ... So these rubrics, these news stories, are some kind of pressure-relief valve for the society.

Here again, like for the role of legitimization of power, the tribune for public discussion role is presented by state-run media as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society and prevents discontent.

Promoting democratic values. Promotion of democratic values was not a very prominent theme as it was mentioned only by two journalists in their descriptions of normative roles. However, both of them felt quite strongly about it and clearly expressed their views that journalists, as one respondent said, must “promote tolerance, stand up to stagnant thinking, totalitarianism, and racism, and promote freedom of speech and expression.”

This role, another interviewee said, is central for news reporters, especially in Belarus:

The most important thing for journalists is, according to their constitutional rights and the Mass Media Law, to provide all information about civic values, about true democratic values. This is especially [important] for journalists working in a country that is so far from these democratic values. I believe that this is very important because everything depends on that, our present and our future depends on that.

In this example, the role was presented as legitimate by reference to media law and the constitution, thus transferring normativity of legal status to the status of the role.

Interestingly, both journalists were about the same age, in their 30s, held senior positions in their respective newsrooms, faced various persecutions for their professional activity in the past, and were quite active and outspoken in social media.

Domain of Everyday Life

The two roles in the domain of everyday life described by some respondents were service and entertainment. These roles were not as prominent as ones in the domain of political life and were listed last among the roles of journalism by the respondents.

Service function. The label “service” itself was used by only one respondent, a news media expert, while other respondents vaguely described the role using terms such as “applicable” or “useful” news, or “providing helpful information,” or news stories that are “closer to people.” A media expert said that the service role is de facto the most prominent role played by many Belarusian mass media because writing about politics is “painful and risky, and service brings money and does not lead to problems with the government.” For local news organizations, the expert said, this could be translated into practices when they do not cover important issues that could help their audiences make informed decisions. Sometimes these local news organizations could write news stories criticizing the president but not local authorities, because it could endanger relationships with them. While an overall service function is in fact important, the interviewee said, mass media should be playing other roles as well:

Everyone needs a service role. But there should be other roles apart from that one. And these other roles are not easy ones and not very safe for news organizations to fulfill. Therefore, quite often they give up on those roles, directly or by devaluating them to rehearsal of news reported by BelTA⁷ or something like that, so they do not do any editorial work of their own regarding this.

⁷ BelTA, or Belarusian Telegraph Agency, is a state-run news agency, or “the country’s official news agency” that serves as a “source of up-to-the-minute news about Belarus’ supreme authorities.” (BelTA website, http://eng.belta.by/about_company/)

Notably, state-run journalists considered this service role important because this “applicable” type of news provided a sense of being useful for their readers, which highlighted the role’s normative character, tying it to importance for people. For example, one news reporter said:

Judging by the feedback from the readers, ... we need more stories that would be helpful for people and more applicable in their lives. For example, where to invest money or something like that. This bank offers these rates, another bank offers other rates. We could be more useful. Because now we are mostly dealing with information and commentary and, well, this word is not used very often, with propaganda of the state interests. ... How do I phrase it in one word... To be closer to the people, maybe.

This aspect of the service function was highlighted by some other journalists who also thought that this “applicable” type of news is expected and particularly appreciated by the audience.

Entertainment. Entertainment as a role of journalism and journalists, although not necessarily as a normative role per se, was acknowledged as an important one by several respondents. The role was usually mentioned last in the journalists’ lists of roles. Some of them explained that they talk about it because they believe it is important for their audiences. For example, one journalist said:

The role of entertainment is probably the third one. Just because you asked about the roles that are important for the society. This might be not important for me ... but I understand that it might be important, considering circulations, ratings of entertainment stories, that such stories are popular, which means they are important for consumers.

Another respondent noted that the prominence of the entertainment role is explained by the changes in the media environment and appearance of new media, which shifts focus from other functions of journalism to entertainment.

What is Journalism/Journalists?

Although not initially a part of the interview guide, this question emerged as a noteworthy subject for discussion as respondents were expressing their views on how their colleagues in other news organizations view normative roles of journalists. Such discussions also included questions about the central, or critical, roles and practices that are essential for news workers to be considered journalists.

Some journalists from independent news organizations believed that their colleagues working for state-run media do not fulfill the watchdog role and, therefore, questioned their legitimacy as professionals. For example, one reporter said:

In the strict sense of the word, I would not call them journalists. They are rather staff members. Because in one or another way journalism means performing these functions, foremost monitoring the power. When a journalist works as a mouthpiece for government, essentially just delivering their decisions, this is a bit of a different job. This is the job that in business is called, I don't know, PR, and for the government it could be called propaganda or providing information. ... Today BelTA is doing some journalistic work daily but they do not fulfill a true journalistic function because their first goal is to inform people about government's decisions. This removes the critically important aspect of their role: the possibility to critically assess deeds of those in power.

Though not frequently, this view was expressed by other interviewees who called their colleagues who work for state-run media “service employees” or “propagandists.”

However, this was rarely as strongly worded as in the excerpt above and overall journalists from state-run media were not denied their legitimacy as journalists.

According to a Belarusian media expert, journalism that does not fulfill a watchdog function, does not represent readers' interests and limits its role to service journalism is still journalism; it is just not free:

I think this is also journalism, but it is not entirely free journalism. Because in their editorial offices journalists still discuss important news that changes their lives, but they do not have courage to write about it. Local news organizations, for example, do not have courage to write about national politics because national politics is mostly done in Minsk. Or, for example, if local authorities make an unpopular decision they [local news organizations] do not write about it because they don't want to damage their relationships. ... But they realize that this is self-censorship and that they are not allowed to do certain things. So, this is still journalism but journalism with self-censorship.

Another journalist from an independent news organization told about Belarusian journalists who still try to fulfill the most fundamental functions of watchdog and the role of the fourth estate “despite some of them went through prison, arrests, or prosecutions”

The journalist said about the other types of news workers:

All the rest...are either suppliers of information...or just some kind of conveyor. Or you work for a propagandistic machine. There is also a category that is producing counterpropaganda. I will not be naming these resources. But this is also not journalism. It's counterpropaganda. And journalism does not produce propaganda.

It is important to note that more than half of the respondents recognized that there are true professionals working in both types of news organizations.

Summary and Discussion

This study revealed that the most prominent normative roles in the domain of political life were providing information, providing education, being a watchdog, providing commentary, and serving as mouthpiece. In addition, journalists spoke about a mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, the role of providing a tribune for public discussion/dialogue, and a role of promoting democratic values.

The hierarchy of normative roles described by Belarusian journalists was quite similar to the hierarchy of normative roles of their colleagues in other countries. In addition, journalists often spoke about journalistic norms important for the fulfillment of

normative roles, such as objectivity, pluralism, truthfulness, balanced reporting, and impartiality. Exclusive for the orientations of journalists from state-run news organizations were mouthpiece and ideological/propagandistic roles. Notably, respondents highlighted the interventionist character of some roles and underemphasized the roles in the domain of everyday life, namely a service function and entertainment, which is also similar to the roles described in the literature on journalists' normative roles perceptions in other countries. (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Hanitzsch and Vos, 2016; Willnat and Weaver, 2014; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996)

As illustrated by Figure 1, overall, journalists from state-run media appeared to be more loyal/collaborative in their role orientations, while journalists from independent media appeared to be more adversarial/monitorial in their role orientations. Also, while important for journalists working for independent and state-run media, some roles were described as encompassing different goals by the representatives of the two journalistic communities. Examples are news media playing a mediator role as a communication channel between the society and the government in the absence of fair elections and news media playing a mediator role facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between social groups and the government, respectively. This variance means that even within one role, journalists from one country, but from different types of news media, could differ in their role conceptualizations or how that role helps facilitate a social ideal inherent for this particular political environment.

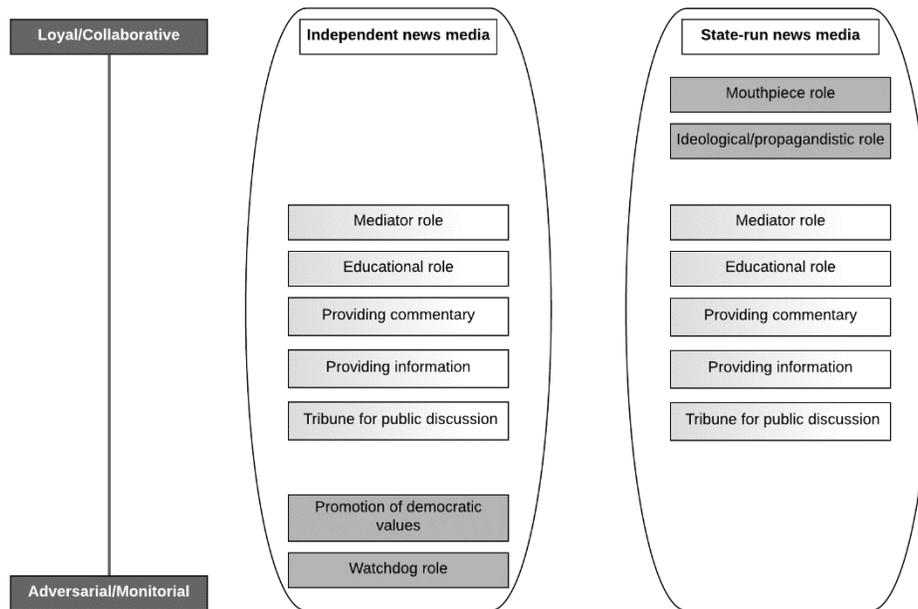


Figure 1. Normative role orientations of journalists from independent and state-run news media.

Another important take-away from the chapter was that all respondents acknowledged that the existing political and economic environment in Belarus made some normative roles, like a watchdog role, problematic, but also made certain roles more prominent. For example, the corrupted bureaucratic system of the government enabled journalists to conceptualize a role as mediators who “help solve problems.”

Finally, journalists used a variety of discursive strategies to describe roles in normative terms. In most cases, journalistic roles were defined as normative because they provide society with tools necessary for decision-making, empower audiences with knowledge and deliberation opportunities, enable fairness in the society and, hence, serve to improve people’s lives. The roles of mouthpiece, legitimization of power, and the

ideological/propagandistic role were described as normative because they help prevent rumors, sustain peace and conformity in society, and preserve national security. To present the ideological/propagandistic role as legitimate, it was also described as observable in other countries and, hence, globally acceptable.

This distinction in the types of normative discourses again brings us to somewhat divergent stances of the two types of news media on ways specific normative roles facilitate the social ideal inherent for this political environment. Though this could hardly be described as a firm distinction between independent and state-run news media, one can notice that in the first case, the social ideal includes a society of informed citizens who participate in deliberation processes and make informed decisions. In the second case, discursive justification implies that sustaining peace and conformity in the society and preserving national security are the two priorities.

Chapter 5. Daily Roles and Practices of Journalists: Interventionism, Power Distance, and Market Orientation

“I would like to highlight that in non-democratic regimes, people who choose to work at independent news media are more principled and talented. They make this choice, which is in essence a choice of destiny, and for them, it is a passionary role, not just trade... We should not be putting degrees of press freedom on one line with the degrees of freedom of a political regime. In environments with limited freedom, journalists de facto expand those boundaries with their civic courage and take as much freedom as they can and want. Some sit quietly in non-state news media and others criticize the president and openly say that he has been in power for too long and prevents progress in the country. I myself write such things. And I say what I want.”⁸

This chapter reports on how journalists describe their professional roles and practices in terms of interventionism, power distance, and market orientation.

Conceptually, these three dimensions, as suggested by Hanitzsch (2007), capture the variance in the journalists’ role perceptions in different countries. For interventionism, the distinction between two poles, or between high and low levels of intervention, “tracks along a divide between two types of journalist; the one interventionist, socially committed, and motivated, the other detached and uninvolved, dedicated to objectivity and impartiality” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 372). In journalism cultures with an interventionist approach, news workers may act on behalf of social or political groups by getting involved or promoting change.

Journalists were asked the following questions about their roles and practices in the interventionism dimension:

1. Do you think journalists can state their opinions in their stories? Or should they be impartial and provide only facts?

⁸ From an interview with a media expert and journalist.

2. Is it acceptable in some cases for journalists to be promoting any ideas or causes in their news? Can you share an example or two from your practice?

The power distance dimension, or “the journalist’s position toward loci of power in society,” could be described as a continuum with the “adversary” pole (high) on one end, and the “loyal” pole (low) on another end (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 373). In adversarial journalism cultures, journalists openly challenge power holders and act as agents of social control. On the “loyal” end of the power distance dimension, journalists are taking on a role of propagandists and could be described as “being defensive of authorities, routinely engaging in self-censorship, and serving as mouthpiece of the government or the party” and “often become public relations channels for the transmission of government messages to the public.” (p. 374).

Regarding power distance, this study covered the ways journalists describe their professional roles and practices in terms of dependency both from government interests and commercial interests. Therefore, they were asked the following questions:

1. How do you choose the topics for your news stories? Are you getting any news stories assigned? Do you need approval for a news story before you begin working on it?

2. How much autonomy do you personally have in selecting news stories you work on? Can you describe any examples?

3. How do you decide what sources you need to contact for your story? What considerations do you have to make regarding this? Can you describe two or three recent examples from your work?

4. How do you decide what aspects of a news story should be emphasized?

Can you provide an example?

5. How much autonomy do you have in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized?

6. How do you learn the news about the local and national government? Who decides what will be covered in your news media in this regard?

7. Have you ever experienced any constraints imposed by potential or current advertisers when selecting your news stories? Can you provide an example?

Finally, the level of market orientation “is high in journalism cultures that subordinate their goals to the logic of the market; it is low in cultures that produce the news primarily in the ‘public interest,’” with media addressing the people in their roles as consumers and citizens, respectively (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 374). In the first case, the emphasis in news coverage is on “what the audiences want to know at the expense of what they should know” as well as on the values of consumerism and everyday issues (p. 375). In the second case, journalists help citizens stay informed to be able to make decisions for successful self-governing. Importantly, “a journalistic orientation to the logic of the marketplace crystallizes in a journalistic culture that provides help, advice, guidance, and information about the management of self and everyday life,” which means journalistic practices oriented toward service journalism would signal higher market orientation.

To start conversations about the roles and practices of journalists related to market orientation, respondents were asked the following question:

1. Do you usually think how your story could help sell newspaper better (attract more readers to your website)?

The rest of the chapter is structured according to the three dimensions and reports on various aspects of interventionism, power distance, and market orientation as described by journalists.

Daily Roles and Practices of Journalists: Interventionism

For interventionism, or levels of involvement of journalists in matters they cover, three main aspects of journalistic practices were presented in the interviews: neutrality or opinion in news coverage; journalists as decision makers or being detached in matters of choice/evaluation of sources; and, finally, direct involvement of journalists and news stories that lead to change. Because of the absence of fair political contestation and strong political parties, levels of partisanship in the Belarusian press are generally low. Interventionism could be observed in journalistic practices in terms of objectivity vs. impartiality (such as neutrality or opinion in news), detachment or involvement (journalists as decision makers or being detached in presenting or avoiding certain sources), and promotion of change (or how journalists view practices that make direct impact on issues or policies).

News and opinion. Most of the respondents expressed their belief that news and opinion should not be mixed, that those are two different types of journalism, and that the division should be clearly identified in news media. For example, one journalist said:

I have my certain beliefs and I might support certain ideological views ..., not actively support but maybe sympathize. For example, I know that I do not support policies of the current government. Still, I do not have a right to express my opinion and my beliefs in news. There is an editorial column for that. This is a very clear distinction for me, that facts and opinion are two very different things.

Several respondents said that complete neutrality is impossible, even in news, because, as one journalist put it, “we are people and not mic stands.” Still, most journalists from both state-run and independent news organizations said they think opinion should be minimized in news.

At the same time, a few other journalists said that opinion in news is possible and even important to have; it just needs to be clearly presented as a point of view and not as a fact. For example, one respondent said:

If we talk about certain international standards, European or American, we know that a news reporter should not do this [present an opinion in news], and readers should be making their own decisions. But today, if a journalist shares certain democratic values, the beliefs will be evident anyway. And I don’t think it is bad because today a news reporter who is interesting is not a robot, ... but a person with an opinion and views.

This practice of mixing opinion and news was also described by two media experts who said that division of news and opinion has not become a requirement for Belarusian journalism.

Although journalists showed their awareness of the norm of separation of news and opinion, as do many journalists in other countries, many acknowledged that the norm is often neglected in practice. Importantly, as journalists working in a non-democratic country, some respondents felt that they are obliged to share their opinion in news if it helps spread civic and democratic values among the members of society.

Choice/evaluation of sources. When discussing their practice of choosing and evaluating sources, journalists were presented as decision makers, on one side, or as detached and merely transmitting information, on another side. Opinions on that appeared to be divided according to the types of news media where respondents worked. Journalists

from independent news media assigned more responsibility to news workers than did journalists from state-run news media.

For example, several journalists from independent news organizations said, contrary to the norms of objectivity, that they sometimes decide not to contact the other side of a conflict when they feel it might confuse or even misinform their readers. Another journalist from an independent news organization said she would not contact a source with radical views, for example, profascist, even if that source was commenting on something unrelated to politics and ideology, like a specific economic issue.

Journalists from state-run news organizations, instead, spoke about themselves as being detached transmitters of information with audiences who are responsible for evaluating information and making conclusions on their own. In this sense, news workers were described as mirrors that transmit information the way they receive it. The economic crisis of 2011 was not covered in state-run media, and the term ‘economic crisis’ has never been used until officials started using it. Commenting on that, one journalist said, “We were just doing our job. Who gives us information? They [officials] give us information. They do not call it crisis, and we just repeat that.”

Audience members in such discussions were presented as clever enough to make their own conclusions based on presented facts. This approach, another respondent said, also allows journalists not to take too much responsibility in evaluating facts or sources in case their opinion is mistaken.

In their choices and evaluations of sources, respondents were divided according to their type of news media. It appeared that the mouthpiece role of state-run media predetermined a more detached role for journalists as transmitters of information.

Journalists of the independent news organizations felt more involved in choosing or declining specific sources based on their own understanding of truthfulness and credibility of such sources. They were more inclined to present a balance of sources, which might impact their audience's opinion. Without naming it as such, independent news journalists talked about false balance and their efforts to avoid it.

Public involvement of journalists. A more active involvement of journalists in public matters, including promotion of their views and ideas that often lead to change, is acceptable, several respondents said. Furthermore, some of the journalists believed such opportunities should be used on a regular basis to impact public opinion or help people solve their daily problems. This was described as especially relevant and effective in cases of small local issues.

One journalist openly expressed his frustration about the boundaries of what could be covered in their state-run newspaper and that his news stories are often edited to remove criticism. Yet he said that he continues to work there because he has many opportunities to impact public opinion and in some cases even policies. Another journalist working for a state-run news organization described several examples when news reporters can make a direct impact on policies or events:

Let's take teachers as an example. Let's say they are given some directive that they do not understand or why they need it. They turn to a journalist ... who can figure it out and find out where this directive is coming from and if it is really needed, things like that. And sometimes this can lead to a retraction of that directive. Or another popular issue: delay of a construction. Nobody can help, people are turning to different offices. And only when the newspaper covers that issue and it becomes public, the problem might start moving along. Maybe these are some smaller things but I think they are important for a person in daily life.

When asked about the boundaries of active involvement in certain public issues, one respondent said that very often, when people contact their newspaper with their problems, “they want not just coverage and objectivity, they want justice and fairness.” Therefore, news organizations must provide a platform for debate around such issues.

Overall, according to the respondents’ accounts, Belarusian journalism culture could be placed closer to the interventionist pole of the interventionism dimension. Described practices define news workers as socially committed and motivated rather than uninvolved. Although clearly familiar with the norms of impartiality and separation of fact from opinion, in practice journalists do not often follow them. The active stance of news workers in news stories that lead to change in people’s lives was described as especially relevant and effective in cases of small local issues.

Daily Roles and Practices of Journalists: Power Distance

This subsection is structured as follows: it begins with the discussion of how journalists describe their actual professional roles and practices in terms of power distance from government interests, including, first, perceived levels of autonomy and, second, types of influences on autonomy from state interests. After that, I will turn to autonomy from commercial interests, including perceived levels of autonomy and two types of influences on autonomy from commercial interests: advertising and owners’ impact on editorial freedom. This structure allows the two types of influences on power distance described in the literature to be addressed: autonomy of journalists from the government and autonomy from commercial interests. Together with perceived levels of autonomy, or what journalists *think* about their relative degrees of freedom overall, this study reports on specific types of influences to better understand how these influences

might actually affect autonomy levels, including the cases when journalists describe them as high.

Autonomy from state interests: Levels of autonomy as described by journalists. Although journalists from both state-run and independent news organizations in Belarus said they experience impact of the state on their work to varying extent, it is state-run media that deal more often with the direct involvement of authorities into daily editorial work. Among the respondents who spoke about low levels of autonomy from the government the most prominent voices were of journalists who had experience of working both for state-run and independent news organizations at different points of their careers. They compared practices and levels of autonomy in both types of media and described differences. For example, one journalist said:

When I worked for a state-run newspaper there were cases when I had a good topic and story but the chief editor said, “I am sorry, the story is good, but we cannot publish it because the story mentioned the writer who is critical of the government, so the story will not appear.” Here [at an independent news organization] I haven’t faced such issues. A story is rather being evaluated on its own merit.

Another journalist, to compare her experiences at her previous job at a state-run newspaper and her current job at an independent news organization, said that she would rate levels of autonomy as six vs. eight out of 10 for the state-run and independent news media, respectively. She explained that while recognizing certain commercial influences on autonomy in private news organizations, she believes that there is still a major gap in what journalists can and cannot cover in the two types of mass media.

Journalists who knew the interviewer personally before the conversations appeared to be quite sincere in what they experienced in their work at state-run media. For example, here is the exchange between the interviewer and one news reporter:

I: But when such problems as corruption happen on higher levels, for example, on the level of the city administration, do you even take them into consideration as ideas for your news stories?

R: Such stories do not have a chance. I tried to write something like that. For example, I wanted to write about the problems of entrepreneurs, small businesses. All people know that this is a very complicated issue in our country. Bureaucracy, corruption, it is terrible. They told me to not even try.

I: Who told you that? Your editor?

R: Yes, the editor. At our editorial meeting.

However, several journalists from state-run newspapers said that they are free in what topics they choose to cover and that they have never experienced any restrictions on topics. When asked if a journalist needs an approval of a particular topic, one respondent answered:

We discuss a topic with the editor. But we do this rather to get a better understanding of the way it should be covered or maybe if you are missing an interesting aspect. ... Because an editor is a more experienced person.

While denying the existence of limits imposed on their autonomy, several other journalists provided somewhat contradictory descriptions when discussing specific examples, which signaled that they might be not completely sure about the scope of their editorial freedom. For example, here is the excerpt from the exchange with one respondent from a state-run newspaper on coverage of a controversial issue:

I: So, you are saying that your opinion on this topic might have been published as it was or it might have been “edited” in some way?

R: No, I do not exclude the possibility that it might have been “edited” at some point or something like that. [The editor is] a person who reads my texts and who might think I went too far and so on. This is true. But this kind of stuff happens everywhere. I think one can find it everywhere in the U.S., too.

Some journalists from state-run media also said that although there are no undesirable topics as such in their newspapers, they always knew it is important to remember *how* to cover certain issues and what to emphasize and what the angle of coverage should be.

On the other side, journalists who work for independent news organizations spoke about high levels of autonomy in the sense that they are free to choose almost any topic of coverage, contact any sources, or highlight aspects of news stories they consider important. Some limitations and taboo topics they mentioned are described in the following subsection on types of influences on autonomy from state interests.

In most cases, journalists from both state-run and independent news organizations in Belarus described their autonomy from state influence as moderate or high. Those who spoke about low levels of autonomy were journalists who had experience of working both for state-run and independent news organizations. These accounts, together with descriptions of specific examples, signaled journalists' uncertainty of the scope of their editorial freedom.

Influences on autonomy from state interests. The following types of influences will be discussed in this subsection: censorship and taboo topics in news, self-censorship, “required” assignments, retaliation from authorities, restricted access to information, economic discrimination, and government subsidies. All these types of influences represent either direct involvement of state officials into editorial practices, have impact on such practices in an indirect way (for example, via editors or managers of the news media), work as punitive measures, or work as influences on economic wellbeing of news organizations and their editorial policies in the form of sponsorship or allocation/retention of advertising.

Censorship and taboo topics in news. Although in Belarus there is no office or authority that censors all news stories before they appear in print or online, a few journalists from state-run news organizations described milder versions of censorship that they might experience in their work. For example, two journalists said that sometimes when they are covering something, they are asked to leave out some aspects of an issue or to cover something in a particular way or not to write anything critical about an issue or a governmental office and its activity.

A few journalists also described how they were not allowed to interview sources for their news stories if such sources were outspoken critics of the government. For example, some state-run newspapers would not cover musicians or writers from the ‘black list’ of banned Belarusian artists who openly expressed political views and/or participated in political rallies. Another common practice in state-run media is to cover only ‘approved’ politicians, for example, candidates to the parliament who do not represent any oppositional party. According to one respondent, requests to be cautious in coverage of alternative candidates can come either from a state official or from an editor.

In addition, several journalists said they know about the few topics they should avoid if they do not want problems for their independent news organizations. For example, one respondent said:

A: We were told that in Belarus, there are five taboo topics.

Q: Who told you that? The Ministry [of Information]?

A: No. A person who spoke to someone at the Ministry. ... They told him and probably asked [him] to tell us. These topics are religion and church, homosexuals, family of the president, tragic state of the Belarusian economy, ... and I think also politics.

For state-run media, the unwillingness to write critically about the offices that provide subsidies was labeled as a principle of “not biting a hand that gives you food” by one journalist. Another journalist said that when working at a state-run newspaper, they never covered even very prominent and important news if such news represented local or national officials or the state of the economy in a negative way.

Two journalists spoke extensively about their frustration regarding censorship and self-censorship in their practices and how often these two are hard to distinguish from each other. One respondent said:

First you bring ten topics, and seven of them are “killed” and three left. Then after suggesting topics over and over again, you realize that you still get three topics [approved] out of ten. And you understand that you still need to write and earn salary. So, you start to adjust and yes, it appears to be censorship.

A news reporter from state-run media laughed while telling how skillful editors often are in rewriting texts so that even small criticisms somehow disappeared from the news stories. Several respondents noted that such practices can result in a significant misbalance in reported news and what people see in real life.

Self-censorship. Self-censorship was a prominent subject for discussion, although the term itself was rarely mentioned. Respondents spoke more about being excessively cautious in political news or openly acknowledged that they are afraid of retaliation from authorities.

Two journalists spoke about the professional deformation that they experienced after they had worked for state-run media for some time because they had to always remember where they work. As one journalist carefully put it, he always remembers to “choose topics accordingly.” Another reporter said even after leaving a state-run newspaper to work for a private news outlet, he subconsciously continued to avoid any

criticism in his news stories and always considered ways to avoid harming relationships with official sources:

I realize that this is it, this is self-censorship. Unfortunately, it will take quite a long time to get rid of it, I understand it. ... If you experience pressure-pressure-pressure all the time, then you have to change a lot to survive. There is no other way.

Another important reason to be cautious in their news coverage of politics, a journalist from an independent news organization said, is to avoid becoming a lightning rod for danger for advertisers because businesses do not want to have problems with authorities for publishing ads in outlets that criticize the government.

Finally, the fear of retaliation from authorities, in particular suspensions of newspapers or blocking of websites, is another reason journalists choose to be careful in covering news. One journalist said that the system of warnings and suspensions “definitely has an impact on journalists’ work ... because nobody wants to see their colleagues losing their jobs because of your story.”

Similarly, another journalist from an independent news media said:

You will not find in mass media ... any in-depth stories about the president’s family. Everyone is afraid. We are afraid. We will also not cover it. And frankly, this is not shameful because we know that this person has a cutoff switch that he can use to turn us off. Just like this, with a tumbler switch, with just one move of his hand. This is why it could be very costly for us. This is a very banal situation. We will stop performing all the rest of our important functions at the same moment when we start covering this topic.

Extreme versions of self-censorship, a media expert said, are when news media choose not to cover certain topics at all. He said, out of fear of sanctions or warnings for any possible errors, certain local news organizations do not cover elections, as if they are not happening. Sometimes, such a position is declared to be a part of editorial policy, but it is important to remember, the expert added, that this policy is caused by self-censorship.

Censorship, self-censorship, and taboo topics in news were prominent topics for discussion with many respondents. With a few exceptions, mostly journalists from independent news media used the terms of self-censorship and taboo topics while journalists from state-run news media spoke about news stories being “edited” in a certain way. According to several respondents, self-censorship becomes a part of a socialization process in newsrooms as journalists learn about ‘unwritten’ editorial policies regarding coverage of risky topics by suggesting topics and sources and observing which ones are declined or approved. With time, it becomes a subconscious choice in daily practice.

‘Required’ assignments. A very important part of the work of state-run journalists is writing assigned news stories. Usually governmental offices call editorial offices or send information about events that need to be covered and editors assign them to journalists. This practice is so well-established that editors often know on their own which official events are necessary to cover and in what way.

While some respondents described such assignments as a normal part of their work that they are required to perform as state-run media, others expressed frustration about coverage of these events and stories that frequently lack newsworthiness, are insignificant for people’s lives and only serve a mouthpiece purpose. In addition, some respondents said that often these ‘required’ assignments take so much of their time that they have very little time left to work on their own ideas. Another complaint was about the meaningless and repetitive character of many such official news stories when journalists struggle to find an interesting angle.

The ‘required’ assignments represent an important part of work for journalists from state-run media in their fulfillment of the mouthpiece role. This aspect signifies the

lowest levels of power distance in journalists' practices, as they have very limited flexibility in how and what they choose to cover.

Retaliation from authorities and prosecution of journalists. Retaliation from authorities can take various forms and lead to journalists always being extra-careful in covering news. According to respondents, some forms of repression include, most often, suspension of news media, blocking websites, and denial of accreditation, and more rarely, confiscation of equipment and, in extreme cases, detention and prosecution of journalists.

One journalist passionately described her concerns about lack of freedom of the press in Belarus and what news workers have to deal with. She compared them to acrobats who have to balance various forces:

The government does not guarantee immunity of the mass media business I know that in European countries they say, "I do not agree with your opinion but I will fight with anyone who would try to silence you." Here, it sounds like "I do not agree with your opinion, so I am closing you." That's all. This is why we have to be very crafty to be able to provide [information]. A journalist in Belarus is like an acrobat who walks on a rope. On one side, he must be careful not to harm his boss's business ... and on the other side, provide audiences with the information they need. And this is a big problem.

A media expert described the almost unlimited sanctions which could be applied toward news media, including online media. The warnings news organizations received from the Ministry of Information were often issued for minor reasons, such as, a factual error. A news website could be blocked without any notice if the Ministry considered some information on it harmful to the Republic of Belarus.

All government offices, including the Ministry of Information, police, and courts, protect each other in cases of prosecution of journalists, said one reporter. He spoke about a recent case when a journalist from their news organization was beaten by the police:

So, we wrote to all the authorities, the prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Information. And they all ... responded that "the police informed us that your version of events is untrue and he [the journalist] was obstructing policemen's work" and that he deserved it.

Another journalist described how news reporters who cover rallies or mass protests are usually at higher risk of prosecution because they might be considered part of the conflict.

Although rarely applied in recent years, retaliation from authorities remains an important factor that impacts journalistic levels of autonomy. According to respondents' accounts, silencing efforts by government toward news media, and journalists personally, work as threats for some, but not all, reporters.

Restricted access to information. Journalists experience problems with access to information almost on a daily basis. It is, according to one respondent, "a separate huge problem for Belarus." When deciding what sources to contact for news stories, journalists have to take into consideration the closed character of some of the government offices that are unwilling to provide information to news reporters, especially in regional news outlets, a media expert said. Moreover, according to another media expert, limiting access to information is supported by existing legal acts:

This is not just a subjective attitude of government officials; Belarusian law provides this. We have a law on government service and the president's decree about the work of government offices with the press. They state that officials can provide information to mass media only with the permission of a senior official. This should be done by a person specifically appointed to work with mass media. In practice, in most cases this serves as another barrier or filter on information from a government office to the public. Sometimes journalists cannot obtain it at all. And of course, if a journalist gets rejections over and over again, sometimes for completely ridiculous reasons or without any reasons at all, then next time he might not want to ask for that information.

In daily practice, journalists explained, this might take various forms of restrictions. These might include delays in providing information for an indefinite time; referrals to press

secretaries and PR persons; selective accreditation; and discrimination toward news outlets and journalists by not informing or not inviting them to certain government press conferences or events. Such practices are common not only at government offices but at some state-owned major businesses and factories as well.

The root of the problem, according to one journalist, is the absence of instruments of public control over officials, such as elections or courts. Likewise, another journalist said:

When a state official is responsible to the people who elected him and whose salary is paid by their taxes, then he is more interested and open to the press. But now, when officials are responsible only to the person who appointed them, they do not have any motivation to be open ... and communicate.

Lastly, according to a media expert, the system of journalistic accreditation at various government offices often works in selective and unpredictable ways, serving as another restriction on the access of information for news reporters.

Economic discrimination. Another type of influence of the governmental offices on journalism in Belarus is economic discrimination. According to respondents, the first significant cases of such discrimination happened in 2005-2006 when several independent newspapers were removed from the system of subscription and distribution. Because the state had a monopoly in providing these two services, many news organizations had to close, others created their own systems of subscription and distribution or changed their format to online news. "There is a clear political context behind all of this," a media expert said.

Another type of economic discrimination mentioned by several respondents is problems with advertising many independent news organizations experience. Because the economy is state-controlled and most of the largest businesses belong to the state, most of

that advertising is also, accordingly, published in state-run news media. Private businesses can choose to buy advertising space in state-run or independent media, but, according to journalists, there were cases when business owners received calls from local authorities who recommended that they avoid independent newspapers, especially the ones that actively publish critiques of the government. As some journalists noted, this situation significantly limits resources that independent news media, often struggling to survive, can compete for on the market.

Government subsidies and mandatory subscription. The final type of influence on journalistic autonomy from state interests is government subsidies and other forms of benefits provided to state-run media. According to a media expert, although the state budget contains information on the support of state-run media, it is not clear how much of those funds go to each news organization. He also added that there is an indirect financing of news outlets as well, such as collaborative projects with government offices. Such projects are sometimes documented as the newspaper's income, but in fact they use the money from the state's budget.

In addition, the monopoly of state-run media on certain types of advertising or announcements, such as yearly financial reports of stock companies, can also be viewed as the government's support of state-run media because companies are required to publish their ads in specific newspapers. The details of such financing, the expert stressed, are not open to the public, so both journalists and audiences can only guess about the extent to which specific news outlets are subsidized. This lack of public information led to somewhat confusing and mixed testimonies of journalists about their news organizations' finances in the interviews.

Finally, there is also a system of mandatory subscription, when government offices of different levels, schools, libraries, and state-controlled enterprises are required, or as one journalist put it, “recommended,” to subscribe to a certain number of copies of state-run newspapers of their choice. Journalists are often engaged in promotion of their news media and work with city or regional administrations to increase subscription rates.

Autonomy from commercial interests: Levels of autonomy as described by journalists. Journalists working for independent media perceived their levels of autonomy as high, and several respondents said that any topic within the limits of law is open for coverage. They acknowledged, however, certain limits imposed by the editorial policies as well as dependence on readership and clicks and constant push to provide the kind of news stories that attract most audiences. The economic hardships which independent news media struggle with often limit their resources for journalistic investigations, a media expert said.

In the matter of choice of topics, most news reporters said that they are almost absolutely autonomous. For example, this is one news reporter describing the process of news topics selection:

Sometimes I find topics myself, and this happens most often, because I deal with my subject more. My bosses or colleagues can notice something and give me advice [about some topic] too, but rarely. And I do not remember a single time when I was ordered to cover a specific topic. More often it is a discussion But I never covered anything that I thought was not interesting or was unnecessary.

The only reason to exclude something from coverage, another respondent said, is a journalist’s incompetence in the subject. Otherwise, professional coverage of any topic is allowed at their news organization.

In most cases, power distance from commercial interests was not perceived by journalists as something as important as power distance from state interests. This might be explained by the relatively larger influence of the state, as well as by the specifics of media market.

Influences on autonomy from commercial interests. Two types of influences on autonomy from commercial interests are discussed here: advertising and the owner's impact on editorial freedom. For non-state news media, these two indicators signify power distance from commercial forces and are usually considered to be encountered by journalists most often. For state-run news media, the focus is only on the impact of advertisers in this section.

Advertising. Although the concept of an invisible wall as such was not mentioned in conversations, most journalists from state-run and independent news organizations said that they do not experience any involvement of advertising departments of their news organizations into editorial work. For example, one reporter said that their editorial policy and policy of the business state that an advertiser cannot ask to remove a critical news story on his business. However, he said, that was different at his previous job where advertisers' interests were more important and unfavorable news stories were removed from the publication.

A media expert confirmed the variety in editorial policies that exists regarding advertising at different news media and said that cases of interference in editorial work by advertising departments do in fact happen. News reporters could be told that they must be careful when covering advertisers or that the news stories they suggest are simply not

interesting for readers. Another type of influence is when a news organization covers an event in an advertiser's business:

PR departments of businesses and news organizations know that if you are not friends with a news organization, then they will not notice some event in your business and will not write a news story for free. But if you are an advertiser, then they might write a news story for free.

In such cases, a journalist who receives an assignment, might not even know why he is being sent to cover that event.

Finally, news outlets often choose not to cover political topics that are too risky so that they remain attractive to advertisers who are often unwilling to deal with openly oppositional outlets. In these situations, journalists appear to be balancing between the two forces, commercial and government, at the same time.

Owner's impact on editorial freedom. The impact of owners other than the government was described as insignificant by most journalists with a few exceptions. Respondents said that they have almost never experienced any direct involvement in their work or choice of topics and have never been asked to emphasize certain aspects of their news stories. Still, several journalists acknowledged commercial influences in the form of pressure to produce stories that would increase readership and attract audiences to their websites, which in turn would bring more advertising.

The few exceptions when journalists described their owner's involvement in journalistic work was, for example, when one respondent said how they were informed about three topics that they should not cover at their news organization: "He came and told us that there are three 'no's': we do not cover politics, we do not cover gays, and we do not cover extremely graphic criminal things." The owner and chief editor usually work together to make sure such requirements are enforced, this respondent also said.

Similarly to journalists in other countries but to a much smaller degree, Belarusian journalists acknowledged the inherent tension between commercial interests and providing news of public importance. The differences in how respondents perceive the impact of advertising on their daily practices mean that the ‘invisible wall’ principle has not been established by all news organizations.

Daily Roles and Practices of Journalists: Market Orientation

To place journalists’ daily roles and practices according to the dimension of market orientation, here they are divided into two groups: ones that emphasize higher levels of market orientation and ones that signal low levels of market orientation.

High levels of market orientation. In this subsection, such indicators of high levels of market orientation as pandering to readers’ interests, focusing on news-you-can-use, and journalists as promoters of their news organizations will be discussed.

Pandering to readers’ interests and news you can use. It was acknowledged by most journalists both from independent and state-run news organizations that readers’ interests are very important for their media outlets. However, commercial interest as such and journalism as a form of business was emphasized mainly by respondents working for independent news media. For example, one journalist said:

It would be a hypocrisy not to acknowledge our interest in coverage of topics that are interesting to readers and that attract advertising. We and some other very limited number of mass media ... depend on how they are bought and sold. ... We fully depend on advertising.

A media expert said that some online news organizations pay more to journalists whose stories get more reads. Some respondents also explained how they work toward knowing their audiences better and providing the kind of information that their readers want. When

talking about changes they would like to see in their news organizations, several journalists from state-run media said that they want to see more topics that attract larger audiences. One news reporter said:

I would be more interactive in communication with the readers. What is interesting for people? Try some bold topics... I would write about things that are interesting for everyone. We need to write about what bothers people. Even without politics. Some everyday problems.

Contrary to the idea that service journalism and emphasis on news-you-can-use signals a journalistic orientation to the logic of the marketplace as described in the literature, some respondents from state-run media said that they are oriented toward satisfying readers' interests *rather than* toward commercial interests. One journalist explained that because they can rely on government subsidies, they do not have to seek advertising revenue or sponsorship and can turn their attention to providing the kind of news that is most important to readers.

Another reason for news media reliance on service news, or news-you-can-use, was described by a media expert who said that apart from good revenue, such news is safer to cover than political or economic issues because it does not lead to problems with the government.

Journalists as promoters of news organizations. Another important role journalists play in their newsrooms is promoter of their organization. Several journalists described a practice at many state-run newspapers when every journalist is assigned a specific region of the country and is responsible for promoting their news organization in that region. Quite often, journalists travel to the assigned regions to participate in meetings at factories or have "subscription days" at post offices where they talk about their newspapers in an effort to attract audiences and increase subscriptions. Most of the

respondents seemed unconcerned about those practices while others said they think their advertising departments should be taking care of that rather than reporters.

A media expert said that some news media pay journalists for bringing in ads to their newspaper or online media. They also pay for writing native advertising, a practice that is illegal according to the Mass Media Law.

Low levels of market orientation. Lack of economic motivation and news of public importance are two aspects that signal low levels of market orientation in journalism culture in this study.

Lack of economic motivation. According to a media expert, due to government support, economic motivation at state-run news media is observed to a lesser degree than at independent news media, with a few exceptions. For example, a few TV channels that are half-state-owned are quite active in earning money on their own. Still, even for those TV channels, such activity was described as limited because their motivation was quite low due to availability of the state subsidies.

For some state-run news organizations, the question is sometimes whether to receive state subsidies or to earn money selling ads on their own. Several years ago, a state-run newspaper began earning good revenue selling ads but was told that they could not use it, a media expert said. The newspaper was given a choice between profits from selling ads or subsidies from the state; they could not have both. In the end, they chose to receive subsidies because advertising revenue might dry up while state subsidies would always support the newspaper.

Generally, some journalists from state-run newspapers expressed concern about lack of comprehensive financial goals and plans at their news organizations. Two

journalists, who seemed to be especially outraged by this situation, blamed newspapers' management. For example, one of them said:

In Belarusian journalism, no matter the form of ownership, leaders and managers are often journalists who finished, at its best, the [communist] High Party Academy. And at its worst, are just journalists That is why chief editors, who can be brilliant in writing op-eds, are hopeless in managing news media as a business. Most editors do not understand a thing in finance or strategic planning or business management.

This all reflects on journalists, the same respondent said, as they do not have a clear understanding of the goals and how their work for a particular news organization is evaluated and what kind of work is encouraged.

Another journalist said that this lack of economic incentive leads to unwillingness to introduce changes or improvements in a news organization. For example, she said this was observable in the newspaper's slower adoption of ways to interact with their audience via social media.

The reasoning behind the lack of economic motivation is different for independent newspapers that often simply struggle to survive and do not have resources to increase their revenue. One journalist eloquently stated that the question of how to increase revenue or subscriptions are not relevant for Belarus or independent news media at all.

News of public importance. Finally, the balance of news of public importance vs. news that attracts the largest audiences was discussed mainly by journalists who work for independent news media. Several respondents said that it is their responsibility as journalists to make sure this balance is implemented and to make important news more interesting for their readers. For example, one journalist said that she personally believes there should be less entertainment news but at the same time she understands how such news attracts more readers. Similarly, another journalist said:

I don't know if this is a compromise with a conscience... We are responding to audience's requests and in the end, we work to satisfy their needs Any business works this way. Pandering to it all the time would mean that we would need to change [our news organization's format] to celebrity news or news on traffic accidents that have good readership. But we do not do it because we understand that we have some kind of social role to play

Specifically for Belarus, the same respondent said, it is important to cover political news even when journalists recognize it might be not popular at all with their audiences:

This is why the news that I know for sure will not have many reads, like for example news on opposition leaders discussing a reform of electoral legislation for a thousandth time, I still understand that it is important because this is all the opposition is doing. And not to cover it would mean death of any [alternative] political life.

When answering how they select what news to cover, several journalists described both readers' interest and public importance as news values. One of them said that for their news organization, public importance outweighs some of the taboo topics that they know can lead to problems with the government offices. They still choose to cover them because such topics have direct impact on people's lives.

Summary and Discussion

The second research question asked how journalists described their professional roles and practices in terms of three dimensions: interventionism, power distance, and market orientation. Similar to how journalists emphasized an interventionist character in their descriptions of role orientations, most of the respondents also approved practices that signify a more active involvement of journalists. Sharing their opinion in news, choosing or declining specific sources or choosing to frame their ideas in certain ways, and involving journalists in public life in ways that lead to change were mentioned.

Journalists from independent news media felt obligated to spread civic and democratic values among the members of society. They were also more involved than their colleagues from state-run news media in choosing or declining sources and framing their news stories in certain ways to avoid false balance. This could be explained by their higher levels of autonomy and flexibility in choosing sources. Journalists from state-run news media, instead, spoke about reporters being just detached transmitters of information, with officials serving as their primary and often unquestionable sources.

Responses regarding the power autonomy dimension also revealed some thought-provoking results. Surprisingly, many journalists from both state-run and independent news organizations in Belarus described levels of autonomy from state interests and from commercial interests as moderate or high. These perceived characteristics were contradicted in the more comprehensive conversations. Journalistic practices and numerous detailed examples included discussions of censorship and self-censorship, “required” assignments, retaliation from authorities, restricted access to information, and government subsidies. In the few exceptions when journalists acknowledged lower levels of autonomy directly, they either had experience of working both for state-run and independent news organizations in the past and were therefore able to compare the two types of news media, or they were acquainted with the interviewer before the study and, probably, felt more confident in providing sincere responses.

Finally, for autonomy from commercial interests, journalist working for independent news media acknowledged dependence on readership and advertising. However, the impact from commercial interests on their work was described mostly as moderate or low as journalists said they rarely experienced any involvement of

advertising departments into editorial work and are also rarely advised about certain ways to cover news by editors or owners of news media.

Similarly to journalists in countries with market-oriented models of journalism, respondents spoke about their efforts to balance news of public importance and news that attracts the largest audiences. For state-run media, the logic of the market seems to be playing a somewhat different role. Although several respondents highlighted efforts of their news organizations in earning a profit, because of the support of the government in various forms, economic motivation is observed to a lesser degree at many state-run news media than at independent news media. As a result, several respondents highlighted the lack of comprehensive financial goals, lack of economic incentives, and unwillingness to introduce any changes or improvements in their news organizations.

Chapter 6. Rationalizing the Gap

Q: Do you think your colleagues also experience this dissonance when their views and beliefs conflict with editorial policy?

A: Yes. And I will tell you that at our [independent news organization] there are several journalists who worked [for state-run media] before. And they say it left imprints on them. There is this internal protest. And then you develop some kind of tolerance toward moral violence. It is real, I noticed that myself. When you have been working somewhere for three years, you start thinking: maybe it is ok, maybe it is normal. There are many people who experience that. But there are of course some patrioteers who are enthusiastically defending their beliefs that our country is so great and that Americans want to destroy it. There are such people. But there are very few of them. I think most of the journalists who work for state-run media are always facing the dissonance I described...⁹

After the discussion of normative roles of journalists and their actual professional roles and practices in terms of interventionism, power distance, and market orientation, this chapter will report on how journalists from a non-democratic regime rationalize their daily practices within the boundaries of constraints on their activity. More broadly, this chapter will discuss how journalists explain their choices and orientations and how they address the gap existing between their understanding of normative roles and actual practices. This chapter looks at how respondents justify and make sense of their professional work as well as how they assess dynamics of media environment in the country.

The following questions were used to prompt the discussions and to help journalists change their narrative positions to enable various discourses:

⁹ From an interview with a journalist.

1. Thinking again about the three most important roles of journalists you described before, do you think your colleagues from other Belarusian news media share your opinion on that?
2. If you were a managing editor of your news media, what would you change in it?
3. Imagine that you are a reader of your newspaper. What would you like to change in it? What type of news stories would you emphasize?
4. Do you think your news organization is doing what is expected by your readers?
5. As a reader, what changes would you like to see in mass media in Belarus overall, if any?

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

in the Figure 2. The chapter will be structured according to these categories, illustrated with examples.

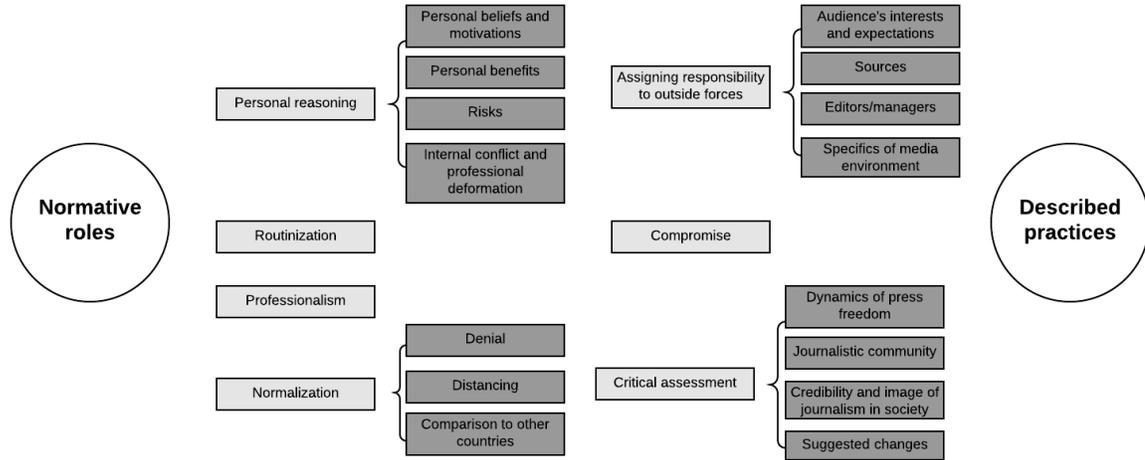


Figure 2. Types of rationalizations journalists used to explain the gap between their understanding of normative roles and daily practices.

Personal Reasoning

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

Personal beliefs, motivations, and benefits. Some journalists described how their views aligned with the editorial policies of the news organizations they worked for and were 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 most often in the conversations about journalists' choices of news media. A media expert said that quite often, young journalists who start working for certain news media later have to switch to jobs that offer better pay and in such cases "they are not choosing what to cover or not, they are just looking for their niche."

Personal benefits in the form of connections are a valued asset in the society with higher levels of corruption, and here is how one respondent described connections a journalist from 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. But I know if you don't have money to feed your child and you have too many problems, then a bird in hand is better than two in the bush...

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

Risks. On very few occasions, risks were named as the rationale for professional choices of journalists. One journalist from a state-run newspaper, who had the experience of working for an independent news outlet in the past, had a particularly strong opinion:

My colleague worked at XX and ZZ [names of independent mass media] and he says it is a 'higher level of journalism.' I understand that some of the independent newspapers are better. But I look at this from the point of view that I have a child, I need some social guarantees, some protection. I am not sure if the editor of the independent newspaper will protect me. He doesn't care what happens to me or how I manage to survive on this small salary. He has his own interests...

The respondent 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. Concluding the conversation on the issue, she said: “So I quit this job. I don’t understand why I should risk, go on barricades, and get problems. For what?”

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, were not as pessimistic about the risks journalists face at their work and described them as limited. One journalist from an independent news organization said:

Control of power holders is a key thing that distinguishes 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; while in others, journalists may choose to stay away from risky coverage.

Internal conflict and professional deformation. Some respondents also shared that they experienced an internal moral conflict or dissonance when their views and beliefs conflicted with editorial policies of their respective news organizations and how such practices often led to professional deformations, including self-censorship. One journalist described that she felt offended when her newspaper did not cover some important issues and events which were undesirable for the government. She added that this constant discomfort led to a constant 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 also 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 lacked newsworthiness, which led to a constant feeling of dissatisfaction. One journalist said that she often gets so nervous over such problems that she has to carry stress medication with her all the time.

Two journalists from state-run newspapers also described how they sometimes decline to work on openly ideological assignments that contradict their views and that sometimes editors have to reassign those to other reporters. However, journalists 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 prints these news stories, right? ... So, if these stories are not under your name, you are fine with that?

A: No, not really..

As illustrated in this section, personal reasoning was used very differently in the rationalization of journalists’ choices regarding specific practices. The examples above demonstrated that respondents used personal beliefs, benefits, and motivations to explain their commitments to certain type of news organizations. Interestingly, while some journalists used the risk argument as a rationale to avoid independent news media, others said that they take that risk consciously because they think this is a central part of their job. Discussions about internal moral conflict or dissonance journalists experience because of specific practices or editorial policies show that they see the gap between how they think their work should be done and what they and their news organizations are in fact doing.

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 choices and practices. Although somewhat similar to the discussion of types of influences on journalistic autonomy in the previous chapter, this subsection rather focuses on journalists’ justification of specific practices and how news workers make sense of their professional work within the limits on their autonomy.

Audience's interests and expectations. Respondents shared their understanding of the interests and expectations of the audience 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 they would expect and value more news that covers people's daily problems and helps people understand complex issues that impact their daily lives directly. For example, one journalist said that her friends who read her newspaper say that they mostly enjoy that type of news.

On several occasions, respondents from state-run news outlets shared their belief that such news coverage does not necessarily include political news or any criticism at all and, as one journalist put it, "one should not think that the entire Belarusian public only waits for some critical news stories. People live their regular lives and they want to know what is going on around them."

Similarly, another reporter said:

If a person does not get his salary on time, he does not care about politics. This is why politics and some global international problems... They are important, of course, but for a regular person, local topics are closer. Something that happens next to us...

Several journalists from independent news media, instead, said they believe their news organizations should provide more "socially significant" news rather than entertainment. At the same time, they understood how news media have to balance audience's interests with news of public importance.

However, this is not the only way audience interests impact news practices. One journalist shared an example when they had to change their editorial policy and abandon their principles under the pressure of readers' interests. She said that several years ago,

they decided to limit coverage of the incumbent president because “he had too many platforms for being public.” But later they changed their position: “We changed our opinion; we had to step on our own song’s throat because news stories with his name in headlines get the most reads. Other news organizations will tell you that as well.” She added that although they carefully choose to publish only the most important news stories on the president, usually those news stories are the most popular on their website.

Sources. Sources, or problems with access to information, was mentioned as another factor that impacts daily choices and practices of journalists. To some respondents, this factor was more significant than to others.

In the first case, journalists shared their frustration and complained about the situation and how they believe something should be done about it. In the second case, journalists shared their solutions. For example, one journalist from an independent news organization explained what she would do 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. His opinion will not be there, and we will write that he declined our request to provide his comment.

Most news reporters said that even when they know their requests will probably be declined, they still make attempts to contact the source. In the end, many journalists described that they often have to work hard toward establishing good relationships with sources or seek alternative ways of finding or verifying information. In doing that, they often have to be creative and work with sources other than government officials.

Editors/managers. In most cases responsibility for certain choices in daily practices was assigned to editors/managers. This happened in narratives of journalists

working for state-run media. A few respondents said that often they must ask for an editors' approval before covering an issue or interviewing a person. For example, one journalist said:

A: I talk to my boss [before covering something], just in case. It happened several times when journalists interviewed someone ... and then they were told, "No, we don't need it."

Q: Why? Do they give reasons?

A: They just say it is not interesting. Very subjective reasoning I think. No other explanations.

Similarly, a news reporter from an independent newspaper said that the editor-in-chief's subjective view can play a role in how much coverage is devoted to specific topics, including more "risky" ones.

Two journalists from state-run news outlets recognized that editors and managers sometime have limited power in choosing the newspaper's direction because it is established "from above" by a government office. Here is the exchange to illustrate the point:

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.

Another news reporter believes that everything, including how much editorial freedom journalists can have, depends on deputy editors, or people who read news stories before they appear in print. In the scenario when this respondent had to imagine being an editor-in-chief, she said she would explain to her deputies that she is the only person responsible for what is published and if someone is fired because of a news story, that would be only her:

I would explain ... that they can have as much freedom as they want. I read the newspaper last before sending it to print. If something [risky] is published then

these are my problems. In this way, they could feel more freedom. These are people who think: “if something happens and I get fired where will I go? We have an army of journalism school graduates waiting to take our places...”

The same respondent also believes that state-run news media will always exist in some form, but it depends on managers and editors how such media will be viewed by the public.

A professor of journalism said that this question of editors/managers’ influence on journalistic practices is significant for local news media where the impact of local city administration could be very prominent. Here, 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 former government officials, which often means the watchdog function of a news outlet is very limited.

Specifics of 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, several respondents explained how specifics of the mass media environment validate the existing situation. For example, one journalist from a state-run newspaper 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 characteristics of the Belarusian media market that is not as well developed as markets in Western European countries:

We have different models of mass media systems. ... If we take the Swedish model, functions of their news media, their typology of news media, it is very different from ours. Our news media, including state-run media, have certain post-

soviet traditions in journalism. So we cannot translate the experience of Sweden to our media market.

In turn, journalists from independent news organizations explained that specifics of the political regime, rather than market, impact the media environment, including influences such as censorship, retaliation from authorities, restricted access to information, and economic discrimination of independent news outlets.

Although both journalists working for state-run news organizations and independent news organizations used the outside-forces justification, it was journalists from state-run newspapers who seemed to be assigning more responsibility for their choices to audience's interests, editors/managers, and specifics of the Belarusian media environment. Respondents justified their practices of avoiding political news by explaining that good and valued journalistic service could be provided by reporting on other things. By saying that they are driven by audience interests rather than by the interests of the controlling government office, they rationalized their work and presented it as important.

Normalization

In the discussions of how journalists overcome restraints on their professional activities, normalization was used as another discursive strategy. By making the situation appear normal or acceptable (while acknowledging the problem or denying it), journalists normalized the status quo by one or several of the following approaches: suggesting alternative ways of understanding the matter, denying any restrictions on their autonomy, distancing themselves from news media or beats that were more susceptible to

restrictions, or comparing the experiences of Belarusian journalists to the experiences of their colleagues in other countries.

Here is an exchange with a journalist from a state-run newspaper that serves as an example of normalization by suggesting alternative ways to see things:

A: You just cover topics that are interesting for you....

Q: But not all news could be covered, right? You just know which topic will be accepted at your newspaper and which will be not.

A: Yes. But 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.

In this exchange, a reporter stated that it is completely acceptable to take your news story to another outlet if the story is politically risky or undesirable to your newspaper and will not make it through the editors' revisions. The use of a pseudonym is justified here as a way to avoid problems for 'risky' stories. In addition to this account, a few journalists from state-run newspapers also said they use pseudonyms for the news stories they write when they cover 'required' assignments with an obvious ideological aspect, such as official events of government offices and organizations.

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

Here are two quotes from that journalist:

Quite often, some journalists replace their unprofessionalism, unskillfulness, and unwillingness to work hard with statements that they have some boundaries. Don't stay within those boundaries! There are plenty of other outlets. Create a blog and you will be absolutely free.... There are other issues, financial ones and so on. But there is more freedom now. In the Soviet Union, we just had a certain list of newspapers and a certain hierarchy, that's it. We did not have pressrooms, PR professionals, press secretaries, bloggers, internet media, nothing. We had three newspapers in town, and that's it.... And now there are a million opportunities. ... You can even go to Poland and work from there if you think your journalistic craft is endangered.

In this somewhat contradictory statement, rather than acknowledging that levels of freedom might differ at state-run and independent news media, the respondent, on the one hand, denied restrictions of journalistic freedom and on the other hand suggested that those who do experience such restrictions could change news outlets or move to another country. Here is also an excerpt from that respondent's explanation of his understanding of autonomy:

I do not like the talks [about journalistic autonomy]. I met with many people and spoke about it in Baltic countries, in Lithuania and Latvia, in Sweden. And this term, journalistic autonomy, or journalistic freedom, has not been confirmed in this sense that an average person thinks about. A journalist is free only if he does not belong to a news media. ... There is another question: will anyone buy this news story from him? ... If a journalist works at a news organization, he is not free from editorial policy of that organization. ... I do not understand an absolute anarchy or freedom of journalism. There are always certain editorial positions according to which a journalist is hired and gets paid. This is why if there are several Belarusian news outlets that are financed by the European Parliament or by Poland, they will write in a way that is desirable for the European Parliament. I can say that yes, we are free to truthfully report on what is going on in this country. But to make up lies about that country or juggle with facts – this is not freedom.

A similar message, but this time not as elaborate, was shared by a professor of journalism who said there is no “absolute freedom” and changed the topic of discussion to another problem the respondent considered more important, namely the mix of PR and journalism.

Some 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 was better at their news organization than at other organizations or that they personally have never experienced such problems, but that they think their colleagues who cover other issues and beats might have. Interestingly, at one news organization, a political news reporter thought his colleagues who cover economic issues experience more restraints while a journalist covering the economy said that this is probably true about his colleagues who specifically cover political news and personal lives of high-profile officials.

Finally, by comparing experiences of journalists in Belarus to practices of their colleagues in other countries, several respondents normalized the situation by presenting it as similar or the same. For example, one reporter from a state-run news outlet 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 “half-... well, complicated from the point of view of access to officials.” He also added: “Maybe this is normal, I don’t know. Maybe in Europe the situation is different. ...”

Here, the normalization strategy led to confusion and uncertainty in how to evaluate the situation. In another interview, a comparison of the Belarusian mass media system with the one in Germany demonstrated a misunderstanding of what public news media are and how they are different from the state-run news media in Belarus. Lastly, one journalist justified the absence of ‘negative news’ at Belarusian news media by characterizing the news environment in Belarus as calm, peaceful, and not intensive and

comparing it to the news environment in Germany or Ukraine, where the situation is different.

Normalization as a strategy was used by journalists to rationalize and defend the appropriateness of their practices, to find ways of overcoming potential personal dissonance, and to make sense of their working environments. Respondents suggested alternative ways of seeing the issue, acknowledged or denied restrictions on their autonomy, distanced themselves from news media or beats that were more susceptible to the restrictions, or compared their experiences to the experiences of their colleagues in other countries, either to Western European or the ones that have similar problems in access to information. Journalists also said that in certain circumstances, the practice of using pseudonyms and writing between the lines could be justified.

Looking for Compromise and Alternative Ways

Both journalists from state-run 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 and 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 are trying to keep at least some minimal balance and that their news organization is known for never openly name-calling and remaining “decent” toward different points of view. “It is better to keep silence than to smear someone with dirt,” he said.

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 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 demonstrate what that office is doing to improve the situation, because, as he explained, “State-run media are orientated toward constructive collaboration. So, if we have critique, that critique must be supported by something, by answers and ways to solve that.”

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 this issue is not approved by the author.

An editor at a state-run newspaper, when explaining how ‘required’ topics are assigned, said that when some journalists are not willing to work on such assignments, she always tries to find compromise, for example, to reassign that topic to another reporter, if possible: “If this is absolutely required, then they [journalists] have to do it, because an order is an order. But most often we try to find a mutual understanding.”

A middle ground, several respondents from independent news organizations said, must be found in how news stories are covered, because there are extreme versions of bias on both sides:

Because in some independent mass media that are allegedly independent, they ignore principles of journalism in the same way as the state-run media do. They mirror each other: one is not objective and defends governmental ideology and the other is not objective and defends some other ideology. I think journalists must seek middle ground.

Finally, some 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, several news outlets organized their own subscription services at editorial offices and mailed newspapers to their readers in envelopes. One journalist also told an astonishing anecdote of how their newspaper gained more subscribers in prisons. He said it happened after 2010, the year when many people got imprisoned after the protest against unfair presidential elections:

When we had a massive number of political prisoners, we sent our newspaper to prisons. Of course, they read the newspaper and gave it to other prisoners. And when they were out, there were still readers of our newspaper. And many of those who come out [still] subscribe to our newspaper... So, considering how many people go through confinement, ... we have quite a big potential.

Although talks about journalists providing balanced reporting and seeking middle ground are usual in democratic countries as well, in non-democratic regimes finding compromise and middle ground could also mean reporters' efforts to cover important news by writing between the lines, negotiating boundaries of their autonomy within the news media, or even cooperating with local authorities in solving and covering certain issues.

Routinization

Similarly to their colleagues around the world, Belarusian journalists have their established work routines. Planning and editorial meetings play an important role in helping journalists to make sure their work complies with the 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 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. All respondents said they have their lists of sources who are experts in their respective topics. Journalists turn to their lists of sources regularly because they know from experience that these people are willing to cooperate with journalists.

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 serves an additional role: it helps to come up with safe ideas and sources for news stories on a regular basis and to overcome problems with access to information. In this way, in non-free environments, routines are dictated not only by norms or deadlines but by the media environment and media restrictions as well.

Professionalism and Journalistic Norms

Journalists turned to discussions of professionalism to explain how the media environment in Belarus shaped journalistic practices, both their own and that of their colleagues, to justify why they are doing or not doing certain things at their news media. It is important to note that under “professionalism,” respondents meant application of

journalistic norms and professional ethics as well as lack of bias and balanced reporting in news coverage.

Several journalists from independent news media and a media expert said that restrictions on journalistic autonomy in fact helped 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 became more disciplined and got used to thoroughly checking every fact. Similarly, another respondent said that potential warnings impact practices of journalists in two ways: on one side, they force reporters to be extra-cautious and on the other side, this is another stimulus to be extremely careful with facts, check them multiple times, and write about important issues without giving the Ministry of Information a formal cause for any type of penalty.

In addition to that, several journalists from independent news media said that restrictions on access to official information led to news reporters being inventive in seeking and verifying information. For example, one journalist said that even for independent news media, it is important to be proactive in establishing good relationships with official sources and a lot depends on the professionalism and patience of the reporter:

The question is in personal contacts, talent, patience, and one's persuading abilities. ... If we aren't able to talk someone into [an interview] then it is our fault. A journalist should go to press conferences, receptions, meetings, communicate in person, give a business card. ... To write in a news story that we couldn't get his comment means to acknowledge our own helplessness. So, we should either be looking for another source or try persuading this one.

Another journalist said that often, to overcome problems with access to information, they are relying more on alternative sources, other than officials, in reporting:

When [journalists from other countries] come to teach us journalism, yes, this is great. But you know, we went through such a good school of reporting during these many years of work in such circumstances. A journalist can always find information, there are so many sources.

This statement illustrates how, to ‘close’ the gap between what journalists think they can do and what they are doing, news reporters got ‘trained’ over the years to be more proactive in seeking information. It means that restrictions on journalistic autonomy and problems with access to information, on the one hand, might translate into self-censorship practices for some journalists, and on the other hand, helped improve professionalism of news reporters and diversified their sources.

A negative impact of the media environment on journalistic norms, namely balanced reporting, usually takes the form of bias in news, some respondents said. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, each camp blames the other for biased and unbalanced news. This was evident in the respondents’ comments about how different media outlets covered the most recent presidential election campaign. Respondents representing independent organizations argued that their coverage was more balanced and diverse compared to their colleagues in state-run organizations who mostly covered the current president. Their counterparts in state-run news outlets argued that some independent journalists demonstrated unethical practices.

Critical Assessment

Journalists’ ability to critically evaluate the dynamics of the media environment and press freedom in Belarus helps them to make sense of their work and be cognizant of changes that impact their daily practices. By recognizing positive dynamics, journalists

said they are sometimes able to move closer to a normative understanding of their function.

Dynamics of press freedom. Most of the respondents spoke about a certain level of improvement in press freedom environment in the country compared to several years ago and talked about liberalization of the public sphere in general. A media expert said that although the process is very slow and appears to be under strict control, indeed, the situation for journalists has improved. There are almost no recent cases of fines and warnings issued for journalists, with the exception of a few recent detentions of journalists who covered protests in early 2017.

Journalists from state-run news organizations were somewhat more optimistic about the liberalization climate compared to 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 all of 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.

In contrast, reporters from state-run media highlighted significant changes in how the recent presidential elections were covered in their news outlets. One respondent said that their news outlet covered all presidential candidates and that was very unusual compared to previous elections:

A: I will tell you more: we had a directive ‘from above.’ Although it was not necessary. ... The directive was to extensively cover every candidate, regardless if their position aligned with the official one or not. ... This was somewhat surprising for us.

Q: When you are saying there was a directive from above do you mean your editor or a government office?

A: A government office.

Q: And this was unusual because before there were no such directives?

A: That's correct.

A media expert confirmed that the recent election campaign was unusual and several, not all, state-run media covered all candidates. However, he stressed that the coverage was not proportionally balanced and the active president was covered a lot more than other candidates. However, he said it was “some kind of imitational democracy” because the candidates’ positions on many issues were not clear and pluralism was “allowed” but “limited.”

Another area where the situation improved, according to several respondents, is access to information and relationships of journalists with government officials who are somewhat more flexible and understanding of the roles of journalists than it was several years ago. “This does not mean any openness. But officials learned how to work with journalists,” one respondent said.

This ability to recognize the positive change often meant that journalists were able to expand the boundaries on their autonomy. According to several respondents from state-run news organizations, such improvements, whether superficial or real, made them more satisfied with their work as the gap between normative roles and daily practices got smaller.

Journalistic community. Dynamics and polarization in the journalistic community were prominent themes for conversations with journalists and experts. Respondents acknowledged a certain level of polarization and existing differences between journalists of state-run and independent news outlets. They said that mostly those differences are obvious from specifics of coverage.

As it was reflected in many accounts, on a personal level, there are no significant conflicts or confrontations. News workers from different 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 respondent described, people understood that everyone made his or her choice and stopped blaming each other for those choices. However, on a general level, several respondents shared their grievances about a lack of understanding between the two communities of journalists. For example, 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 capabilities.”

The existence of the respective unions of journalists, the Belarusian Union of Journalists and the Belarusian Association of Journalists, reinforces the existing division, especially during “politically intensive times,” as a media critic put it:

There are some contacts, ... but during crisis, ... we feel that division again. Because, for example, when police were detaining journalists for online coverage during the recent protests, the Belarusian Union of Journalists, the ‘official’ union, condemned independent news organizations that were ‘biased in their coverage’ ... It is clear that this resolution was imposed on them from above. But after this, some think they cannot give their hand to such people. ... There is a sense of division during such politically intensive times. But overall, we do have contacts. This is not the fault of journalists but rather specifics of the political system. They always try to divide us from above into truthful and untruthful ones.

Several international journalistic organizations have been making efforts to bring journalists of the two unions together for seminars, training, and discussions. Some respondents said those are helpful in building bridges and trying to understand the other side. Others thought differently, like this journalist, who said there is a big difference in worldviews of the two journalistic communities:

A: I went to such events three or four times. But I will not go anymore.

Q: Why?

A: We always were discussing that we are in the same boat, in the same country, that we are doing the same job, and we do not have to divide anything. But when we start talking about practical things, I see that we have a huge, not even ideological, but worldview gap between us.

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

By being able to evaluate the work of their colleagues from different types of news media, journalists showed that they compare their practices and role conceptions with those of their colleagues and that this comparison helps them rationalize their work. By distancing themselves from the other type of journalistic community, respondents showed that they confirm their professional views and orientations as the right ones. By closing the gap between the two communities, respondents acknowledged the possibility that those roles and orientations might be not that different.

Credibility and the image of journalism in the society. Credibility and image of journalism is important because it shows how journalists think about outside actors constructing the external legitimacy of their profession. The two prominent themes were, first, lack of trust toward journalism and journalists by members of the society and, second, officials viewing journalists as enemies and part of the opposition. These two aspects have a direct impact on how well journalists can perform their roles and how their efforts are received by the public and officials.

Because people see differences between what they see in news coverage on state-run TV and what they see in real life, they distrust the media, one journalist said. This

lack of trust toward news media spreads to other news outlets as well. “This negatively impacts the image of journalists and image of the profession of journalism in general,” the respondent added. She also compared the image of the journalistic profession in Belarus with that of European countries where she said it is more respectable and trustworthy.

According to a media expert, during politically intensive times, levels of trust toward independent news media get higher and then, when things calm down, lower again:

For now, these are cyclical things. With the regime’s resources ending and people starting to think how to live... Maybe very slowly the public begins to realize that they need truthful information. But this is indeed a very slow process.

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 think about themselves as citizens and taxpayers and therefore, are not very interested in learning how the nation’s budget is being spent.

Finally, several journalists also said they want government officials to stop viewing them as enemies or “vultures” and understand that they also work to improve the wellbeing of the society and the country.

Changes. Finally, when talking about changes in the mass media system, respondents demonstrated their knowledge and understanding of other models of journalism and suggested important steps which they thought might bring journalism in their country closer to their ideals.

Most journalists from independent news organizations believe there is no need for the Ministry of Information to oversee journalism 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 were 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, which occupy most of the media market, are essential. Another respondent spoke about demonopolization in the systems of subscription and distribution services.

Fair competition for state resources and advertisers is another thing often mentioned by journalists from independent news organizations. Often, they spoke about elimination or replacement of state-run media with other types of news organizations, for example, public ones. However, although several respondents spoke about the system of public media as an alternative to the existing state-run news organizations, a media expert said that there is still no clear understanding of the differences between the two for most members of the journalistic community in Belarus, particularly as they struggle to imagine that the government will not be involved in mass media.

All these suggestions, the respondents acknowledged, are impossible without changes in the political system and in the way people view and value journalism and freedom of the press.

Summary and Discussion

The third research question asked how journalists from a non-democratic regime rationalize their daily practices within the boundaries of constraints on their activity. In the discussions of how journalists explain their choices and orientations and how they address the gap existing between their understanding of normative roles and actual practices,

respondents provided a variety of rationalizations. For example, personal reasoning, including personal beliefs and motivations, risks, and internal conflict and professional deformation, were used to explain journalists' choices of specific practices or commitments to specific types of news organizations. Interestingly, the factor of potential risks was mentioned by the respondents in different situations: either as a rationale for working at a less-risky state-run news outlet or as an accepted matter of fact by journalists from independent news media that either has a very small impact or no impact at all on daily choices.

Internal conflict and professional deformation was a strong theme present in the narratives of journalists from state-run news media that illustrated news workers' experiences when their views and beliefs conflicted with editorial policies of news organizations they work for. It appears that the large gap between how journalists think their work should be done and what they and their news organizations are doing in fact could be quite harmful for their morale, as respondents described their constant feelings of discomfort, anger, and "internal protest."

In their reasoning, journalists often assigned responsibility to audience's interests, sources, editors/managers, and specifics of the Belarusian media environment. Journalists from state-run news media believed that the audience's interests and editors/managers significantly impacted their work and the freedom they had. They also justified the practice of avoiding political news by explaining that good journalism that is valued by audiences could be provided by reporting on things other than politics. It is hard to say if journalists truly believed in such statements or they subconsciously tried to normalize the situation to make sense of their work.

To make the situation appear normal or acceptable and to defend the appropriateness of their practices, journalists described alternative ways of approaching their work, such as taking their stories to other news media or using pseudonyms; they acknowledged or denied restrictions on their autonomy or distanced themselves from such, and compared the experiences of Belarusian journalists to the experiences of their colleagues in other countries by presenting them as similar or the same. Respondents also justified their work by explaining that often they try to find compromise and middle ground in writing between the lines, negotiating boundaries of their autonomy within the news media, or even cooperating with local authorities in solving and covering certain issues. The findings showed that news routines of journalists are dictated not only by norms or deadlines but also by the media environment and restrictions as well. In non-free environments, routinization of daily practices helps provide safe ideas and sources for news stories on a regular basis and overcome problems with access to information.

Another interesting idea was offered by several respondents, who said that restrictions on journalistic autonomy, in fact, could be seen as having both negative and positive impacts on their practices. For example, the system of warnings and suspensions, on one hand, might translate into self-censorship practices of some reporters, and on the other hand, might help improve their professionalism. Here professionalism meant that they are more careful in observing journalistic norms, fact-checking, and being ethical in their practices, so as to avoid any penalties from the Ministry of Information. Journalists from independent news media said that they are now more disciplined, are used to thoroughly checking every fact, and, because of the existing problems with access to information, are more inventive in using diverse sources.

When providing critical assessments of the dynamics of press freedom, journalistic community, credibility, the image of journalism in society, and suggested changes, journalists showed their ability to evaluate the circumstances, be cognizant of changes, and make sense of their work and media environment according to their beliefs. Although being somewhat skeptical about the recent trend toward liberalization of the public sphere in Belarus, some journalists from independent news media recognized that being responsive to even small positive changes in media environment helps them ‘regain’ their territories and establish higher levels of credibility in times of political or economic crises, which is especially hard to achieve in depoliticized audiences of non-democratic nations. In their descriptions of ideal models of journalism, many journalists from independent news media were describing the models of western democratic nations, including, for example, the free competitive media market and the system of public broadcast media.

Chapter 7. Conclusions

This study is an attempt to broaden the scope of journalism studies research beyond western nations and look at how journalists in non-democratic regimes conceptualize normative journalistic roles and how they describe and rationalize their actual institutional roles and daily reporting practices. It investigates nuanced understandings of role orientations, practices, and experiences of journalists in an under-researched region and under-researched type of political environment by including diverse voices of news practitioners and local media experts.

In this chapter, I will turn to explaining the findings of the dissertation and its theoretical implications for the literature presented at the beginning, namely normative theories of the media, news media and democracy, empirical literature on journalism cultures and professional roles, and mass media and authoritarian regimes. Finally, I will turn to the discussion of limitations and future research.

Normative Theories of the Media

This study revealed that normative role conceptions of journalists in non-democratic countries varied as much as conceptions of journalists in democratic ones. Notably, respondents mentioned most of the roles that are described in the literature as essential ones for democracy, namely providing information, investigation, commentary, serving as a public forum, and promoting democratic values (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009; Schudson, 2008). The three roles that became prominent in the specific circumstances of an autocratic regime were a mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, and serving as a mouthpiece. These roles were defined as normative because they

help prevent rumors, sustain peace and conformity in the society, and preserve national security.

Speaking in terms of normative theory, the roles of journalism that help support the social ideal as understood by journalists working in this particular regime cannot be described as having one direction or one goal. Instead, these roles represented two mostly competing directions. One direction reflects the ideal of the nation's development toward representative democracy, which is characterized by the society of informed and concerned citizens who participate in deliberation processes and make informed decisions. Another direction represents the ideal of protecting the status quo, sustaining peace and conformity in the society and preserving national security. These two directions are reflective of the two normative understandings of the roles of journalism, or how the press ought to operate to sustain certain political order (Zelizer, 2011), a democracy and an autocracy in this case. Importantly, these two directions might become more or less prominent in news media depending on specific political conditions in the country and in the world. For example, during the Crimean crisis and the war in Ukraine, in the light of uncertainty about Russia's intentions toward Belarus, the direction of preserving the integrity of the country by supporting conformity and peace in Belarus and sustaining the status quo might have appeared a preferable option for many news outlets.

Thinking about the four normative roles of media in a democracy discussed by Christians et al. (2009), namely monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative, the hierarchy of role orientations of journalists in Belarus suggests prevalence of the monitorial role for both state-run and independent news media. The facilitative and radical roles were more characteristic for independent news media while a collaborative

role was more pronounced in the discourses of journalists from state-run newspapers. This positions the two types of news media, independent and state-run, on adversarial/monitorial vs. loyal/collaborative poles of role orientations, respectively. This division, however, should not be viewed as a definitive one because respondents suggested modified versions of some adversarial/monitorial roles, which state-run news media are not able to fulfill. For example, journalists spoke about a modified version of the watchdog role as “helping people solve their problems” or journalists being “representatives of the people.” In addition, certain normative roles that are important for democracies can attain a different meaning in a non-democratic regime. For example, while a mediator role is important in democratic countries (McNair, 2009), in an autocracy it becomes prominent in another way, as the last communication channel between the citizens and the government in the society without fair elections.

Although socialization of Belarusian journalists is not the focus of the study, one can observe the impact of globalization of a media environment and diffusion of journalistic norms and orientations on how news workers in non-Western countries view their roles and norms (Cottle, 2009; Hanitzsch et. al., 2011; Reese, 2008). The numerous workshops, seminars, educational trips, and meetings of Belarusian journalists with their colleagues in Europe seem to have had its impact on how journalists describe their understanding of normative, or ideal, journalistic roles and models of mass media system. This socialization in a global context and adherence of Belarusian journalists to the public trustee model of journalism also speaks to the globalization of the professional logic (Waisbord, 2013). At the same time, journalists’ commitment to collaborative,

interventionist, and advocacy roles demonstrates a hybridization of professional culture of Belarusian journalists.

News Media and Democracy

While journalism has shown to be historically necessary for democracy, the assumption that democracy is an essential requirement for journalism does not seem to be supported as “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” (Zelizer, 2012, p. 467). Indeed, in most countries in the world, journalists work in non-free or partly free environments, with only 13 percent of countries enjoying free press (Freedom House, 2017), while the pragmatic performance of mass media in fulfilling normative functions in democratic nations have been roundly criticized (Bennett, 2016; Bennett and Serrin, 2005; Curran, 2005; Iyengar, 2011; McChesney, 2012; among others).

The findings presented here underscore a point made at the outset of this dissertation, that political regimes of the countries should not be equated with mass media systems and that democracy is not an essential pre-existing condition for journalism. This study supports the approach to democracy as a concept that should be measured on a continuum, rather than as a binary “free-unfree.” It also suggests that the question “Is there journalism without democracy?” is not productive and represents a “blinkered view” of the situation, while in fact it requires a comprehensive assessment of specific journalistic practices and levels of autonomy in different news media (Josephi, 2013, p. 475).

This study showed that there is a place for journalism in countries with lesser degrees of press freedom. In an environment of the autocratic regime of Belarus, journalists' conceptions of normative roles proved to be very similar to their colleagues in democratic nations. News workers shared their common understanding of journalistic norms, such as objectivity, pluralism, truthfulness, balanced reporting, and impartiality, as well as ethical principles. Journalists from both state-run and independent news organizations provided explanations of how they are working to overcome boundaries and restraints on their autonomy to provide reporting that serves interests of their audiences. Every day, journalists are doing their work to explain complex issues and policies, serve as mediators between the otherwise detached officials and members of the public, facilitate dialogue between different social groups, and, in the end, contribute to the development and wellbeing of the society.

Despite restrictions on their autonomy, many journalists from independent news media said they are free to write about what they want and how they want. In explaining this, I would like to get back to the quote presented at the beginning of the fifth chapter, when a media expert and journalist said that news workers in autocratic regimes are often expanding boundaries of press freedom with their civic courage and report critically of government offices and policies. Not all news media and journalists do that, of course, but many respondents stressed their efforts to keep up with the normative roles and ideals of journalistic profession they have. In several cases, journalists showed their awareness of their rights and were willing to take risks in the situations when they thought public interests were at stake.

Another important point in the argument about journalism in non-free environments is that certain types of restrictions, such as the system of warnings and suspensions, while abhorrent, nevertheless led to a more disciplined professional culture of journalists. Several respondents said they got used to thoroughly checking every fact, since any mistake could endanger their news organization. In addition, restrictions in access to official information led to journalists relying more on alternative sources, other than government officials, and being inventive in seeking information, which in fact helps diversify sources and voices presented in their reporting. Journalists also showed their awareness of how government officials might be using mass media to promote their views of the situations, twisting the facts, or avoiding important issues. Respondents explained that they therefore got used to making critical assessments of sources, including official ones, in order to overcome false balance and confusion.

Finally, 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, when a European official declined to recognize her and her colleagues from Belarusian news organizations as journalists because “there is no journalism in a dictatorship,” this study showed how that official’s criticism clearly missed the mark. As the results of this study demonstrated, a closer look at specific cases and circumstances is needed to understand how journalists in non-democratic countries are doing their work in complex conditions.

The Empirical Literature on Journalism Cultures and Professional Roles

In adding to the empirical literature on journalism cultures and professional roles, this study highlights the main distinctive characteristics of Belarusian journalism culture,

offers observations on additional factors that have impact on mass media systems, and suggests an understanding of how journalists rationalize the gap between journalistic normative orientations and actual practices.

As previous research has shown, there have been variations of journalism cultures not only between, but within, nations as well (Van Dalen, De Vreese, and Albak, 2012). This seems to also be the case of Belarusian journalism, as journalists from state-run and independent news media show not only varying understandings of normative roles (more loyal/collaborative vs. more adversarial/monitorial) but also in how differently they described their practices in terms of power distance and rationalized the gaps between normative ideals and actual practices.

One common characteristic of Belarusian journalism culture, an interventionist character of role orientations and practices, was previously described in the literature as something more typical of developing societies and transitional democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Respondents perceived the impact of the political environment and state interests as something having more impact than commercial interests on their editorial practices. As this study demonstrated, in one country with different types of news media, state-run and independent in this case, the logic of media market might be playing very distinct roles when government subsidies, allocation of advertising, and economic discrimination come into play.

Journalists spoke about struggles and concerns similar to the ones in many countries of the world, such as tension between profit orientations and civic responsibility, ideological bias and gap in coverage, underperformance of watchdog and investigative roles due to a lack of resources, polarization of the journalistic community,

and lack of trust toward journalists and news media (Bennett, 2016; Bennett, Serrin, 2005; Curran, 2005; Iyengar, 2011; McChesney, 2012). The study also hints about some other trends, such as move toward commercialization of news and reliance on public relations sources in news reporting that are observed in democratic nations as well (McNair, 2009).

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 (Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011, among others), this study hints at other important aspects, including, first, the impact of historical traditions in news outlets management, and second, depoliticized audiences. The traditions in news outlets management, namely appointment of government officials as chief editors borrowed from Soviet times, in most cases means minimization of journalistic autonomy from government offices in local news outlets. It also can significantly limit journalists' ability to fulfill their adversarial/monitorial functions. The factor of depoliticized audiences can also have a considerable impact on journalistic practices. In non-democratic 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 and Schmitter, 1986). In such environments, it is especially hard for journalists to appeal to a 'monitorial citizen' stance and gain trust with audiences.

As this study showed, journalists developed their ways to negotiate boundaries within editorial policies and rationalize the gap between normative role conceptions and their actual practices. Journalists rationalized the gap by such strategies as personal

reasoning (personal beliefs and motivations, risks, and internal conflict and professional deformation), assigning responsibility to audience's interests, sources, editors/managers, and specifics of the Belarusian media environment, or by normalizing the situation and making it appear normal or acceptable. Journalists also described their efforts to find compromise and alternative ways of approaching their practices, acknowledged or denied restrictions on their autonomy or distanced themselves from such, and compared the experiences of Belarusian journalists to the experiences of their colleagues in other countries by presenting them as similar or the same. Finally, the findings also suggest that in non-free environments, news routines of journalists could be dictated not only by norms or deadlines but by the restrictions on press freedom as well. For Belarusian journalists, routinization of daily practices helps to provide safe ideas and sources for news stories on a regular basis and to overcome problems with access to information.

Mass Media and Authoritarian Regimes

Because this study did not focus on news media content, but rather on roles and practices of journalists in a non-democratic nation, contribution to the literature on mass media and authoritarian regimes is less about certain strategies or ways news media are used as a tactic of rule but rather about the ways journalists describe and explain how they are able to perform their work in a non-free environment.

As other studies showed, some current autocratic regimes may tolerate the existence of state-run and commercial media that serve as a source of more diverse information (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu, 2014; Egorov, Guriev and Sonin, 2009). In the case of Belarus, the limited regime's resources force the power holders to be playing (or pretending to be playing) by the rules of the western neighbors and tolerate independent

news media. It is not clear if the relative improvements of press freedom conditions in the country are in fact something indicative of a larger change or just another “wave” in the opportunistic cycle of the regime as suggested by some respondents. However, for this study it is important that journalists showed their ability to evaluate the circumstances and be cognizant of changes. Being responsive to even small positive changes in the media environment helps journalists ‘regain’ their freedoms and establish higher levels of credibility. This was observed with audience’s higher levels of trust toward independent news media in times of political or economic crises.

State-run news media are still often used in Belarus, like in other countries (Walker and Orttung, 2014), to discredit and marginalize alternative political movements and actors and legitimize incumbents by favorable news coverage. However, as this study has shown, the existing view of state-run media as submissive and completely deprived of their agency to act independently is not quite correct, as journalists spoke about their normative ideals of being socially responsible, helpful for their readers, and representing their interests. The existence of limits on journalistic autonomy from the state interests, such as censorship and self-censorship, “required” assignments, retaliation from authorities, restricted access to information, and government subsidies, is unquestionable. However, journalists from state-run news media are often looking for compromise and alternative ways of providing 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 suggest answers and decisions to their readers. 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 closer to the normative roles described as their ideal. 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.

In the end, this dissertation confirmed that although media systems are indeed influenced by the political systems of the societies in which they operate, they do not necessarily simply reflect political regimes as such and complex social, cultural, economic, and historical aspects in specific national contexts need to be taken into consideration to better understand journalism in other countries (Curran and Park, 2000).

Limitations/Important Considerations and Future Research

There are certain potential challenges and limitations to this study. First, there is an important question of potential impact of the researcher's identity, or multiple identities, on the quality of data, or what has been said/not said and in what way. The researcher's role as a former colleague and a graduate student at a foreign institution might have been viewed by the respondents as the role of an insider and a credible person who knows the circumstances of journalists' practices quite well, on one side, and the role of someone who is distant from journalists' experiences and problems, on another side. In addition, because the study is done by a student of a U. S. university, journalists might have made assumptions about the researcher's pre-established views and the kinds of answers expected from them. This means that respondents might have been more inclined to speak in the way and in terms that are used in western countries to describe journalistic practices.

Second, it is important to assess how my prior relationships or acquaintance with seven respondents from the sample might have impacted the study. In acquaintance interviews, prior relationships with participants showed to have a potential to contribute to interviews as the shared worlds of the interviewer and respondent were made relevant and used as a resource to co-construct the data (Garton and Copland, 2010). This seemed to happen in this study as well. The respondents who knew me before appealed to our shared experiences or to my knowledge of the practices. In addition, respondents who knew me appeared to be more sincere and trustful in their answers as they did not hold back any criticisms or concerns about their working environments.

Third, journalists might have been cautious and unwilling to speak openly about certain issues. There were a few interviews that illustrate this issue. In one interview, a husband walked into the room where his wife was talking with me over Skype and, overhearing what she was saying, warned her to be careful and not say too much. In another interview that was conducted at an editorial office past working hours, a reporter reduced her voice to whisper several times during the conversation when speaking about things she considered risky. Avoiding any potential risks or penalties for Belarusian journalists who participated in this study is of utmost importance. All answers were anonymized and any identifying information, including the names of news media or topics for specific news stories, was either removed or modified in this study.

How the journalists perceive their professional roles impacts their behavior and news content they produce (Donsbach, 2008). Therefore, in future studies on journalism in non-democratic nations, a closer look at how journalists actually perform their normative roles in their news stories might be helpful in providing more understanding of

their practices. Another area of inquiry that could potentially help understand varieties of journalism in non-democratic countries is socialization of journalists, or how the system of professional education and trainings, together with socialization in newsrooms, shapes normative ideals and practices of journalists.

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APPENDIX.

Questions for Semi-structured Interview

Demographic information:

- 1) Age
- 2) Gender
- 3) News organization
- 4) Role in a news organization

Instrument

1. How would you define the main roles of journalism in the society?
2. In your opinion, what are the three most important roles of journalists?
3. How do you choose the topics for your news stories? Are you getting any news stories assigned? Do you need approval for a news story before you begin working on it?
4. How do you determine if a particular topic would be suitable for your news outlet or if it will most probably be rejected?
5. How much autonomy do you personally have in selecting news stories you work on? Can you describe any examples?
6. Do you usually think how your story could help sell newspaper better (attract more readers to your website)?
7. How do you decide what sources you need to contact for your story? What considerations do you have to make regarding this? Can you describe two or three recent examples from your work?

8. How do you decide what aspects of a news story should be emphasized? Can you provide an example?
9. How much autonomy do you have in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized?
10. How do you learn the news about the local and national government? Who decides what will be covered in your news media in this regard?
11. Have you ever experienced any constraints imposed by potential or current advertisers when selecting your news stories? Can you provide an example?
12. Do you think journalists can state their opinions in their stories? Or should they be impartial and provide only facts?
13. Is it acceptable in some cases for journalists to be promoting any ideas or causes in their news? Can you share an example or two from your practice?
14. Thinking again about the three most important roles of journalists you described before, do you think your colleagues from other Belarusian news media share your opinion on that?
15. If you were a managing editor of your news media, what would you change in it?
16. Imagine that you are a reader of your newspaper. What would you like to change in it? What type of news stories would you emphasize?
17. Do you think your news organization is doing what is expected by your readers?
18. As a reader, what changes would you like to see in mass media in Belarus overall, if any?

VITA

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Prior to pursuing her graduate degree, Karaliova worked as news reporter and editor in several newspapers in Minsk, Belarus, and covered public affairs, society, environment, education, and culture and later supervised a team of breaking news reporters. She also spent half a year working as an intern at the professional theatre magazine *Didaskalia* in Krakow, Poland, as a holder of the Poland Ministry of Culture Scholarship for talented journalists, translators, musicians, and artists.