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Chap. 6) Political-Economic Factors Shaping News Culture

Subtle but pervasive influences.

Histories of the printed press and occupational myths tend to emphasise that journalists in most European countries have long been concerned about interferences from political authorities in the editorial sphere. But over time, other sources of potential influence, including advertising, commercial pressures, competition and other economic pressures became matters of concern. As news evolved to become a big business, news desks have had to cope with different forms of political and economic influences, ranging from soft pressures to strict censorship.

On the whole, journalistic practices have been strongly marked by national historical situations and values linked to the particular context in which media were built and to the balance of power with political authorities. European democracies and Eastern regimes produced many national journalistic traditions and models, reflecting differing forms and degrees of media independence and editorial freedom.

If this era is not totally over, a period characterized by the logics of globalization has opened up since the 1980s with the advent of neo-liberal deregulation policies along with the end of state broadcasting monopolies, the decline of PSB models, the increasing role of advertisers, the exponential development of commercial audiovisual channels and, of course, the Internet. Even if political attempts to interfere with news making activities has not disappeared, new factors linked to the capitalistic reorganization of media have a more subtle and wider impact on journalistic practices, values and work. Among those factors, we can point out the structures of ownership and the forces of market, assuming they may influence journalism or even editorial contents, especially when newsmen have to report on sensitive issues.

This chapter will assess how journalists perceive the role of broader political-economy and social factors in shaping their work and news making practices. Two key research questions are considered here: first, the influence of the structures of ownership and market forces, and second, the way journalists deal with controversial issues.

A short introduction contextualizes the emergence of the political economy in the field of communication and media studies, before moving on to a review of the relevant research literature. This seeks to pursue three main objectives : first, to assess the interest of researchers in political economic issues when dealing with editorial cultures; secondly, to point out the differences between former communists countries and European democracies; thirdly to emphasize the main trends in recent investigations.

The next part of this chapter is centred on the empirical work constituted by the interviews. Here, the purpose was to examine what journalists say about economic constraints : the influence of the structures of ownership and market forces on their everyday practice, but also on their working conditions and on the way they cope with controversial issues.

The concluding section suggests a number of trends linked to the evolution of journalistic practices as well as clues to develop editorial independence and promote collective journalistic values arising from our interviews.

Some Terminological Issues

When talking about the *structures of ownership*, we refer here to the financial and legal status of media companies. Some are independent media, such as many papers: usually, the capital is brought by their founders, non-profit associations or even groups of editors and readers (*Le Monde* in France), thus ensuring a majority holding the company; they draw their revenues from their subscriptions, sales of issues and advertising. Others are state-owned institutions, usually radio or television channels, whose budget may be entirely or partly covered by taxes or fees voted by governments; in the second case, extra revenues come from advertising, which means that many PSB stations or channels are in direct competition with private media. Some are private-owned profit-making companies and their capital is shared by private investors or shareholders (typically, with one having a majority holding) and they get their money from advertising and to a lesser extent from sales of programmes or by-products. (Doyle, 2002)

Over the past twenty years, the structures of ownership have changed dramatically with new deregulatory regimes, the digital revolution and the development of Internet (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Since the 1980s, the information sector became a promising and profitable new market for a number of major national and international industrial groups. Often specialized in electricity or water supply, public buildings and works, telephone networks or civil and military aviation industries, big companies like Bertelsmann, Bouygues, Dassault, News International, Lagardère, American Online massively invested media as a way to diversify their activities and control complete areas in the field of publishing and journalistic activities. Many observers view this phenomenon of media concentration as a potential threat to pluralism. (Mattelart, 2005)

The growing role of market forces has led to media concentration and economic globalization. Based on a rationalization of production processes, free flow of information, free markets and economies of scale, market forces lead to fierce competition, thus weakening the independence of journalists as well as their working conditions. Competition particularly affects those working in private media. In Eastern/Central countries, market forces are all the more powerful since transition towards capitalism and democracy was accompanied by rejection of everything related to state regulation and control.

As for controversial issues that journalists now have to cope with, the range of sensitive topics goes far beyond traditional political interferences and now includes self-censorship due to conflicts of interests with economic actors such as private media owners who have other industrial activities, advertisers or shareholders. However, when the interviewees mention controversial issues, they do not necessarily express a consensus on the matter. They sometimes refer to common national or international issues, like urban unrest, the European Constitution or the War in Iraq; they talk about ethics and even more specific realities like football matches, privacy, the uses of images, the Dutch royal family, corruption. In all cases, journalists claim a balanced, unbiased and respectful news coverage according to their journalistic codes of ethics.

Political economic approach.

Over the last fifteen years, major changes have occurred in media landscapes making it all the more necessary to take into account political economic approaches in order to understand newsmaking and journalistic practices.

The relevance of economic factors is evident in many recent developments in the organization of printed media, radio networks and television channels. On the whole, the part played by states or governments is on the decline, especially in the field of regulation

policies, while neo-liberal logics increasingly permeate every interstice of human activities. In this particular context, advertisers, private entrepreneurs and shareholders became the main actors. Deregulation processes have been shaped by strong lobbying efforts by important international companies like Dentsu, Saatchi & Saatchi, Young & Rubicam, McCann Erickson, Walter Thompson or Publicis whose aim was to develop world-wide networks in order to control the management of advertising spaces in the media. In this light, advertisers are not only major financial contributors, but they also shape the form and contents of media. (Mattelart : 1991) Advertising being the main source of revenue, news media services must pursue audience-maximizing alongside “the additional factor of seeking to please and also not offend key advertisers “ (Whitney, et al., 2004 : 406).

As for private groups, media are part of a global strategy developed to diversify their activities and make profit. The novelty is that media and their contents are considered as mere short-term financial operations that participate in what observers call the “speculative bubble“, i.e. markets whose actors buy stocks or assets they usually sell as soon as they can expect substantial profit (Bouquillion, 2005).

Such tendencies considerably weaken journalistic news making which traditionally tends to rely on a steady professional environment capable of guaranteeing editorial independence and attractive working conditions. Owing to industrial mergers, companies restructuring or dabbling on the stocks and shares, many papers, magazines, radio station and television channels change hands for reasons that have little to do with editorial logics. In the end, this system favours big companies and “established news media are likely to be owned or controlled by large media corporations or wealthy individuals“. (Whitney, et al., 2004 : 406; also see Tunstall and Palmer, 1991) .

Thus, political economy approaches address the influences on news making related to media ownership and concentration, financial mechanisms, conflicts of interests between the freedom of press and economic pressures (from shareholders or advertisers) as well as more traditional forms of direct political intervention. They are also concerned with the threats to media pluralism and influences on journalistic autonomy related to weak levels of job security, cross-media linkages and contracts, and the absence of appropriate regulatory policies.

If we will largely concentrate on the above-mentioned issues and influences on news, we can however note that the scope of contemporary political economy approaches also includes issues such as .i) the international organisation and influence of major news agencies, and .ii) the growth of public relations, sponsorship and related ‘information subsidies’ (besides advertising) as influences on journalism and newsmaking. For reasons of space, these two sets of issues are addressed elsewhere in this book (chapters four and eight, especially).

Research in a political economic approach.

The media and journalism studies fields have been strongly influenced by the early research carried out in the United States in the mid-20th century. They are marked by the paradigms based in functionalist sociology or political sciences which pay little attention to the structural effects of economic factors on the organization and production of media. This lack of economic perspectives and the neglect of the political constraints hanging over the means of communication were pointed out by subsequent researchers who sought to analyse the complexity of the media system (Mattelart, 1994; 1998).

The emergence of political economy of communication.

The long history of political economy approaches to media and communication processes can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Hardt, 1979). In terms of the modern academic agenda, they took a major step forward with the emergence of a set of theoretical frameworks in the 1970s. Indeed, Miège and others emphasise that the 1970s was a crucial laboratory and starting point for new political economy analyses of the communication services which grew rapidly over the following decades : audiovisual media, telecommunication networks and data processing. (Miège : 2006, 105). These new techniques appeared after the 1968 protest movements whose promoters paid special attention to cultural and information matters. In this context, many individual contributors were involved, but several key authors can be identified : Herbert Schiller (the first author to conceptualize the notion of *cultural imperialism*), Thomas Guback, Dallas Smythe, Graham Murdoch, Nicholas Garnham, and Armand Mattelart.

Unlike the ethno-centric assumptions of earlier media theorists, the new political economy school tended to favour an international perspective on media production, including the exchange of cultural goods and the flow of information. They addressed media and journalism not only in terms of national-level political and economic developments but also the evolving role of the media in international relations. They interrogated the meaning and limits of the cultural independence of many countries –especially the Third World – in light of the hegemony of multinational firms. They suggested that whether in the film industry, in television programming, in the flows of information driven by news agencies, or in telecommunication networks, the media landscape was shaped by the American rationales, interests and standards. (Mattelart, 1991, 1994)

South American countries were also concerned by the issues related to cultural independence. A whole generation of critical researchers questioned the theories and strategies of modernization promoting a vertical vision of technological development (Antonio Pasquali, Hector Schmucler, Osvaldo Capriles, Luis Ramiro Beltrán; Armand and Michèle Mattelart from their experience with the Allende government). Contrary to Europe, the model of media development was closer to the commercial system prevailing in the United States. Therefore, they argued, what mattered was to link social changes and the democratization of the means of communication. If Latin America produced so many founding studies, it is mainly because, at that time, the whole region accounted for two-thirds of all media resources available in the Third World. (Mattelart, 1994 and 1998)

Both in Europe and Latin America, many debates centred on the public control of audiovisual media and communication networks in order to protect national cultures from the hegemony of the American cultural industries. The potential social uses of electronic media, were also addressed, including the possibilities for alternative forms of communication and the enhanced exercise of communication rights (Schiller, 1976; Mattelart, 1994).

Some of these academic themes and debates were echoed within the UNESCO where third-world representatives, arguing that media and journalism could not be driven solely by the initiatives of western corporations or a *global market place*, claim a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) as a way to counterbalance the flows of information and cultural exchanges. In 1980, the MacBride report suggested a number of strategies and measures to defend cultural policies and communication rights, but it faced strong opposition from the United States and Britain whose representatives wanted to impose their *free flow of information* doctrine. (Mattelart, 1998). Some of the recommendations directly concern journalism and its relation to economic factors : *removal of obstacles and restrictions which derive from the concentration of media ownership, public or private, from commercial*

influence on the press and broadcasting, or from private and governmental advertising. [...] Effective legal measures should be designed to limit the process of concentration and monopolization ... [...] reduce the influence of advertising upon editorial and policy and broadcast programming. (Mac Bride, 1980, Part IV, art. 36-37). These recommendations went totally unheeded.

Recent concerns due to political and technological changes.

As far as our review is concerned, with the exception of Britain and France, there appears to be little research literature engaging with the influence of economic factors on editorial cultures and practices in most of the countries under study.

As a matter of fact, economic aspects of the media received relatively little attention from academic researcher until the end of the 1970s, when most media worked at national level and far from the upheaval of globalization. Things changed around the 1980s down to the late 1990s, a shift linked to the “cultural turn“ in analyses of the media. (Curran, 1990)

Indeed, research literature on economic factors comes later and is often linked to the political changes and technological advances which also affect the new media organization : privatization and creation of commercial channels are one of the major consequences of democratic transitions.

In the comparative study, there is obviously a clear-cut separation between former communist countries and European democracies linked to the speed of changes. On the one hand, researchers point out a very quick shift from totally state-controlled media toward commercial or market based systems of press freedom. Journalists had to cope with a new approach of news making and question the professional codes of ethics. In just a few years, they passed from propaganda to information and their newly-gained independence was not necessarily easy to defend in front of commercial interests and market forces. For instance, in Hungary, if journalists had a long-established experience in resisting political pressures, they appear to be unprepared when pressures come from publishing companies or major advertisers. (Kaposi and Vajda, 2001 in Kovács and al., 2006 : 10) In Slovenia, the transition towards democracy brought radical changes such as privatization of the media, liberalization of the print media market, little regulation in the field of broadcasting. (Basic-Hrvatini & Milosavljevic, 2001. in Zagar, 2006 : 7). Very quickly, the interests of profit are strong and journalists are urged to adjust in order to satisfy advertisers' demands. (Cepin, 1999; Rednak, 2004. in Zagar, 2006 : 7). The Serbian case is different and results from the political crisis following the independence and particularly the beginning of Milosevic's regime in 1997: there was a fierce repression and most Serbian journalists and editors working for major media were dismissed, forbidden to write and replaced by liege men who could serve the regime nationalist propaganda. Since 2000, when the Democratic Opposition of Serbia won the elections, political pressures dropped down.

On the other hand, European democracies went through a slower changing process in three stages. First, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most broadcasting monopolies were abandoned. Secondly, deregulation policies were adopted, leading to the creation of independent or private commercial media competing to extend their share of the advertising market. Thirdly, in the 1990s, media concentration became a rule within and across countries with the expanding role of a limited number of big companies investing in media outlets, including News International and Sky (under Murdoch's control), Bertelsmann, Berlusconi, or Lagardère Médias. (Mattelart, 2005)

Common trends affect all the countries studied, most of them related to the ever-increasing importance of economic logics in the organization of media. It suggests that journalists have been under pressure because of the following kinds of developments

- Heavy competition between and within media due to the expanding number of new media, channels and networks. Competition has been speeded up by the deregulation policies and to an increasing extent, the codes of entertainment took over from those of information. (Hermans, in Guyot, 2006 : 11) This situation can lead to short-time thinking within media companies as well as bad editorial decisions. Besides, the editor's freedom is largely determined by media owners (Horgan, 2006 : 16-20) The arrival of free newspapers like *Metro* also tend to destabilize the independent press. (Ter Wal, 2006 : 8)

- Increasing role of advertisers and economic actors, thus leading to more commercial, profit-making and entertainment oriented media. The main concern for editors, publishers and media owners is to avoid losing advertisers or displeasing owners. A study conducted in Hungary shows that journalists feel that they are less free to choose their topics while more of them report attempts from economic players to influence their writings. (Vásárhelyi, 2000 in Kovács and al., Additional notes for Hungarian report, 2006 : 1) However, any such influence only "concerns the others", as Vásárhelyi observes. The interviewees reported that they never personally felt pressures, but if had, they tend to say they were able to resist. The orientations and attitudes of journalists have changed as they are aware of the commercial aspects of their work and integrate this dimension to their know-how. (Fenati in Ter Wal, 2006 (Italy): 14)

- Relative decline of public broadcasting service or independent media facing competition with private-owned media. Some researchers point out that some public television channels or quality papers still manage to resist the economic pressures and market policies from the publishers. (Ter Wal, 2006 : 6) However, what is generally put forward is the lack of regulating bodies and policies, particularly in the broadcasting field, in order to ensure fair balance between editorial independence and commercial interests. (Zagar, 2006 Slovenia : 7; Guyot, 2006 : 11)

- Media concentration.

In many countries, large conglomerates laid their hands on major segments of media sector for some decades (e.g Garnham, 1990). For example, in Italy, big enterprises took control of large parts of the newspaper industry in the 1970s. Soon afterwards, the same phenomenon was observed in television where 90% of the market was shared by two giants : the public RAI and Berlusconi's Fininvest. (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy : 13) In most countries, researchers observe the effect of extended globalization on media organization. This is the end of the *captains of press* era. Now, the common rule is the diversification of industrial activities for companies viewing the development of digital media, multimedia and information technologies as a profitable market. (Mattelart, 2005, in Guyot and al., 2006). The newcomers may already be in media business, but many are involved in activities that have little to do with media like banks, insurances, public buildings and works sector or arm industry

In France, most media are now in the hands of five groups, four of them having an international activity : Bouygues/TF1, Bertelsmann, Vivendi/Universal, Lagardère and Dassault. (Brémond, in Mattelart, 2005). In the Netherlands, many foreign companies become quite active in the media market. (Ter Wal, 2006 : 8) Now, multi-national and multimedia firms play a major role in shaping the economy of media landscapes.

On the whole, the influence of ownership on journalistic cultures and editorial contents is a recurrent theme, particularly when dealing with newspapers. Even if the answers are necessarily complex, what is often argued is that media diversity supposes both diversity of title and diversity of ownership. (Horgan, 2006 : 21)

At the same time, we observe that political pressures have not totally disappeared. In many countries, the bonds between the political power and media are still strong, through, for example, the appointment of editors (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy: 14) or when journalists have a sustained relationship with the establishment. (Horgan, 2006 : 22)

News Workers' Views of the Political Economic Factors

Our research project's interviews serve to fill certain gaps of the literature review whilst this oral material also confirms the general trends observed in the previous section: the quick process of privatization in Eastern countries, the fierce competition between and within media, the leading role of advertisers and the phenomenon of media concentration show how the economic organization influences journalism, changes their working conditions and modifies the perception and journalistic treatment of controversial issues.

The influence of structures of ownership and market forces

Most interviewees agree on the growing influence of economic factors. But few countries associate the structures of ownership and market forces as one whole thing. Spain is one example where interviewees establish such a link and freely accept to talk about it : *"They are companies looking for profit, they've got to survive, and we are workers."* says a female radio editor. One television news editor observes that *"Means of communication are divisions of much bigger industrial conglomerates, (...) mercantilism increased with globalization."* (Guyot and al., 2006 : 37) In Italy, the problems were amplified in the years when Berlusconi was prime minister with the consequence that one person held the powerful roles of both head of the government and ultimate owner of the major private-sector television networks. One female newspaper editor refers to this *"Italian scandal where it is completely evident that we live under a monopolistic roof (Berlusconi)"*. (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy : 29)

However, the interviews suggest an overall impression that ownership has lesser implications for journalistic practices than market forces. When asked about the weight of structures of ownership, two points of view are generally expressed:

First, in very paradoxical ways, media professionals are usually reluctant to acknowledge direct intervention from owners in editorial matters. The question itself sometimes raises suspicion like in France where a radio editor's first reaction was : *"But, this is a Marxist question"!*. TF1 correspondent *"did not understand the question"*; as for Radio Monte Carlo's chief editor, *"A journalist has a professional status in France which guarantees some kind of independence from his hierarchy management, he has the right to say, ... I don't want to treat this subject this way, because it is against my values."* But he quickly acknowledges that *"A broadcaster, a radio, a TV, a paper, today in France, are also private companies which need to live, to survive, and market data naturally affect the way to work, (...) in choosing the subjects, we have some kind of marketing approach."* (Guyot and al., 2006 : 20)

If they experienced limitations in their work from employers/owners, journalists usually deny any pressure in front the researcher who is considered as an "outsider"; but these limitations do implicitly exist and "are formulated in economic, organisational and technical

terms”. (Kovacs and al., 2006 : 21) One explanation for such reluctance undoubtedly lies in the occupational myths shared by most news workers – especially in Great Britain – that journalistic values and codes of ethics prevent them from outside influence, whether political or economic. This myth seems to be particularly strong in Great Britain (Preston, 2006 : 7), but when RMC’s chief editor refers to his professional status, he also claims the independence and autonomy of the journalistic field. In the Netherlands, interviewees suggest that ownership “does not influence professional standards. Thus is not an issue (...) as independence and freedom of the press and of other media is held extremely high.” (Ter Wal, 2006 The Netherlands : 15)

When journalists do acknowledge the role of such influences, they usually point out that they were never directly confronted to such pressures themselves, rather these are issues of concern to other journalists or media institutions. In other words, the *influence affects the others*. (Preston, 2006 : 42)

As Trevor Kavanagh of *The Sun* puts it : “*I can’t answer for anyone else but it does not affect me at all. (...) I know it must affect other people in the paper and elsewhere.*” Indeed, the latter interviewee goes on to add: “*I know that in the past, Murdoch has actually taken on advertisers who threatened to withdraw their patronage.*” (Preston, 2006 : 43). For a senior Irish journalist working for a paper owned by Tony O’Reilly’s Independent Newspaper group, the stakes are quite simple and the owner “*does not interfere as long as the bottom line is OK.*” (Horgan, 2006 : 29)

The persons having more direct influence and power over the editorial line are the middle managers as one Irish radio presenter calls them. Indeed, this interviewee, who ‘has worked in media for a long number of years’ suggests that : “*People outside the media have historically over-hyped the question of ownership. The people who, I think, exercise great control are the middle managers. They are the executives hired by the owners and they can put an enormous influence on what goes before the public.*” (Horgan, 2006 : 29)

Secondly, there still is a cleavage between public service or independent media and privately-owned groups in some of the European countries. The prevalent impression is that editorial freedom is easier to exert in public media, especially in the audiovisual sector. Pascal Verdeau, a permanent correspondent in Brussels for French public television channels, suggests that the pressures are very strong for “*the colleagues working in private companies. I deal with a particular owner, the State which has slowly faded with the years.*” (Guyot et al., 2006 : 21)

The point of view confirmed by a reporter working for a private television company : “*Less freedom, (as, there is a) mobilisation of the hierarchy checking everything beforehand : “who are you going to meet?” and further down : the subject is viewed with potential requests for corrections*”. (Guyot and al. 2006 : 23)

However, a Czech editor working for the regional public television reports a difference between private media and public service television : in the first case, journalists have to face financial pressures and in the other political pressures which appear difficult to personify as “*They do not call us ... they can call the editor-in-chief ... it is filtered through but you can feel the pressure ... you suspect that the director ... the editor-in-chief was approached by someone who is on the Council of the Czech Television ... sometimes, one’s reaction is self-censorship.*” (Cisarova, 2006a : 3)

In the Netherlands, professional practices are affected by economic limitations and, when competing with commercial channels, public television would suffer less from market forces than commercial channels. According to one correspondent based in Brussels : “*I do*

notice a different role with the colleagues from commercial broadcasting. At most, they have to pay more attention to their budget or they are faced with not being able to do certain things because there is no money for it. But these are limitations in the amount of news supplied, not in the nature of it." (Ter Wal, 2006 The Netherlands : 15)

In Italy, some interviewees suggest that greater freedom of information can be found in "alternative channels that are published on the Internet and/or local radios." (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy : 28)

In Serbia, the distinction between state media and others is not very clearcut and does not mean much according to PSB standards. As the research report for Serbia puts it: "State television, for instance, has not yet been transformed into the public service. (...) Ownership structures in many media are practically the same as in the time of Slobodan Milosevic. (...) The State provides money to many media and this is why the state still controls the media." (Zagar, 2006 Serbia : 17) As for Slovenia, in spite of the privatization law in the media sector, the State still has important shares in most major broadcasters, whether public or commercial. (Zagar, 2006 Slovenia : 10-11)

There is a **consensus among interviewees around the effects of market forces**. All media, particularly in the audiovisual sector, are marked by growing concerns about advertising costs and audience ratings (Ter Wal, 2006 The Netherlands : 15).

For some respondents, PSB had to undergo a real "cultural revolution", as Tim Marshall from BskyB puts it, "*market forces have always played a dominant role (and) even the BBC has to chase ratings*". (Preston, 2006 : 42)

This point of view is shared by Haasbroek of *NOS journaal* (public dutch TV and radio) who notes "*that in reality, in public television audiences, figures play a big role too, just like in commercial television, and that advertising costs constitute also one third of the income of public television, so that they are to some extent commercial too.*" (Ter Wal, 2006: 15)

In other words, the commercial pressures shape the news agendas as journalists are forced to be closer to the so-called audience demands. Therefore, information becomes more fragmented, with more consumer issues, entertainment and lifestyle news, a trend that can be observed in many countries. (Preston : 42; Ter Wal, 2006 The Netherlands : 16; Zagar, 2006 Slovenia : 11; Guyot and al., 2006 : 36). Bernardo Díaz Nosty sums up the situation that can be extrapolated from the Spanish case : "In the last years, what increased in Spain is what we could define as a leisure/entertainment-oriented model." (Guyot and al., 2006 : 36)

Journalists' working conditions.

Before moving on to recent trends and changes in journalists' working conditions, we must flag a potential bias in the findings from our interviews. In our project, most of the interviewees comprised senior journalists and editors. Whilst this may introduce a certain bias in the interview findings, many of our respondents seem quite aware that their relatively high and steady professional position protects them from certain direct pressures experienced by more junior colleagues. Quite clearly, working conditions and other pressures are very different in the case of young journalists employed on short-term contracts.

All interviewees underline the increasing competition as one of the major consequence of the economic organization over the journalists' working conditions. Competition is the general rule, even for what was long considered as independent quality press, like *Le Monde* in France or *The Irish Times* in Ireland. (Horgan, 2006 : 30) The proliferation of commercial television and the arrival of Internet increased the level of competition between and within all

traditional media. Thus, the journalist becomes more vulnerable (Guyot and al., 2006 : 35-37) as he is just one employee among many others working for a company struggling to defend his position on the market, produce a balance budget and in many cases make profit.

As a consequence of competition and media concentration, the printed press faces drastic reductions of its revenues, especially those from advertising. But they also have to compete against other media that put less money in collecting the news. For a journalist working for *Le Monde*, the impoverishment of the press comes from the fact that the quality papers usually have a long-term and costly policy of maintaining permanent foreign correspondents while private television channels tend to “pump” from the news agencies or other media. : *“I do not think it is fair to give the information you collect free of charge. (...) In Germany, where TFI had closed its office..(...), they would call us to know what was going on, (...) I told them it was out of the question, my paper has been investing for 4 years on me.”* (Guyot et al., 2006 : 22)

The deterioration of the working conditions is manifest in the type of contracts being issued to newly recruited journalists. *“We can note that papers gradually (become) impoverished and behind that situation, more and more young inexperienced journalists working on short-term contracts are given heavy issues to investigate and they haven't necessarily got the nerve to resist to the people in front of them; and this weakens the information we offer.”* (Guyot et al., 2006 : 22)

One Spanish researcher and former journalist points out the trend to employ inexperienced young journalists and is very pessimistic about the evolution of the job : *“What happened is intensive proletarianization, so that, in front of ethical codes, social responsibility and professionalism, what prevails is the working law; and in many cases, (what happened is) a decline because of practices like employment of grant holders or students for positions that have nothing to do with training as they are regular jobs.”* (Guyot and al. 2006 : 34) One case study focused on the employment of young French journalists shows that most of them are freelance workers (a situation they have not really chosen), have to prospect by themselves potential editors or news desks in order to sell the reports they produced on their own budget and sometimes during their holiday; they end up with poor incomes which put them among the low-income socio-professional groups. (Le Bohé, in Mattelart, 2005)

However, working conditions may also be considered by young journalists as better and freer than in the past. In Hungary, *“In contrast, the young generation talks about an ever increasing freedom in media, about improved working conditions.”* (Kovács and al., 2006 : 20) One possible interpretation is that, thanks to the democratic transition and also the development of new technologies, it would now be easier to work as a journalist, especially for people who, because of their age, did not have to cope with the straightjacket of state-controlled media. In a quite different context, the technological argument is also mentioned in the Netherlands where *“against (or in spite of) the forces of market, a new form of journalism is created.”* (Ter Wal, 2006 The Netherlands: 17) However, this new form of journalism has little to do with an organized full-time job where you can make a living as *“Journalism is no longer necessarily a paid profession.”* (Ter Wal, 2006 : 17)

The interviewees reveal a cleavage between two positions. On the one hand, a majority of journalists who expect more regulation and more legal framework to protect their profession against economic influence and competition with other media; on the other hand, a young generation who claims new professional standards (with more freedom, more professionalization and more technologies). In both cases, the requests are viewed as the best way to promote and protect editorial independence.

The final aspect of working conditions concerns the social relationships between journalists within the news desk. The combination of technological changes, competition and the need to produce information within very short delays have contributed to a considerable recasting of the journalist's role, *modus operandi* and location within a certain socio-professional environment. For example, one interviewee reports that: "The culture of drinking and socializing has been replaced by one of sobriety. (...) Now all the socialising is replaced by longer hours at the desk and PR circuit." (Preston, 2006 : 26). This point of view is confirmed in other **ironical terms** by a Spanish chief editor : "*In the old times, people would be in bars, in cafeterias, in the streets. We are becoming sensitive to cold, we are frozen. We do not sound out the streets. We don't know what the citizen thinks. We live in capsules.*" (Guyot et al., 2006 : 40)

Political Economic Influences and Controversial Issues

When tackling sensitive or controversial issues, the tensions existing between journalistic values and economic logics clearly appear. They question the journalistic codes of ethics as well as editorial independence. Indeed, the critical point of view or the thorough analysis of facts and events are not easy to put into practice when heavy competition, lack of job security or short-time contracts drive media professionals to self-censorship, shallow investigation and infotainment.

Dealing with controversial issues : the terms of the debate

First of all, when questioned about sensitive or controversial issues, we observe that interviewees spontaneously mention a wide variety of subjects which can be classified into 4 categories : .i) Topics related to national concerns such as violence during football matches, urban unrest, bombing by the IRA, the Basque ETA or Islamic radicals; .ii) International issues such as the referendum for the European constitution, the rise of religious fundamentalism, terrorism or the war in Iraq; .iii) Business matters which are linked to conflicts of interests with advertisers, shareholders or owners; and .iv) Coverage of celebrities, social gossip about the Royal families, sports or media stars, or of trivial events about ordinary people.

Secondly, many interviewees mention that most topics, if not all of them, are controversial (Guyot and al. 2006 : 23). Mediating controversial issues lends credibility to contemporary journalism (Zagar, 2006 Slovenia : 11) and the journalists sometimes feed controversies. In their everyday confrontation with sensitive topics, interviewees strongly suggest that a set of basic professional rules should be merely applied : balanced treatment, respect of contradictory debate with presentation of different opposing points of view, respect for truth, awareness of the audience in order not to offend people's sensitivity. (Guyot and al. 2006 France : 23 and Spain: 39; Horgan, 2006 : 32; Preston, 2006 : 43; Zagar, 2006 Slovenia : 11).

An Italian journalist sums up the ideal configuration : "*We seek to give as many viewpoints as possible. For example, when yesterday the Royal Institute said that the Iraq war has increased the potential for terrorism (e.g. favouring recruitment), the indignation of Islam towards the West, we have given this report. But we have also sought comments that somehow could allow people to understand this Royal Institute report which the British government and prime minister Blair have denied.*" (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy : 28)

As previously noted, news workers can draw on media routines as well as occupational rules and procedures to validate their news stories, or they can refer to the internal organisational guidelines produced by some of the larger media (Guyot et al. 2006 Spain :

39). However, professional ethics often appear as little more than a pious hope against the constraints journalists have to cope with. Many acknowledge that ethical rules are constantly challenged by the shift towards stardom, sensationalism and infotainment; an Irish journalist is clear about it : *“The heroes (...) or the icons of modern journalism are the people who take very partisan view of issues, whether from a left or right-wing perspective. The old concepts of impartiality, objectivity (and) balanced reporting are in decline and sometimes openly derided.”* (Horgan, 2006 : 31)

A variety of pressures.

In practical terms, three kinds of factors interact in a constant tension when dealing with controversial issues :

- Ideological pressures : this was the case during the war in Iraq when the general trend, after the shock caused to public opinion by the 9-11 terrorist plane crashes, was to privilege one side of the story; says an Italian journalist : *“We can say that the global press, but even the Italian one, has taken sides in favour of the war and this was in name of the fact that Saddam Hussein had to be eliminated.”* (Ter Wal, 2006 Italy : 30) A British journalist points out *“immense pressure to fall down on one side of the argument or the other”* although he was grateful that broadcasters were legally prohibited from doing so. (Preston, 2006 : 43)

- Pressures from economic players in the case of conflicts of interests with advertisers, share-holders or owners. It is never good to take unnecessary risks as pointed out by a French journalist : *“The press is in such a bad financial state that papers loose money (...) We can see it with Libération, for example, (...) The chief editor says that when an article talks about a shareholder, (he) must take a close look at it. The drastic separation of the editorial aspect and the financial/advertising dimension tends to blur. If you write a violent article against Dassault or Lagardère, they can take off their advertising budget, and everything depends on advertising.”* (Guyot and al. 2006 : 21)

- Journalists as members of an elite. The interview materials and research materials suggest that this may be more or less a French speciality. They tend to emphasise the collusion between a minority of well-know journalists, the political Establishment and business circles. Journalists were quite prejudiced when they promoted the European Constitution and lost part of their credibility. One of the editor of French *Le Monde Diplomatique* speaks about *“The general indignation of the population,”* adding that *“(media professionals) cannot be totally disconnected from what the majority of people think, (...) They got it wrong with the referendum as all the media, almost most of them, in a quite scandalous way, were favourable to the Yes and disparaged the No. 56% of the people said No. This is a slap in the face for the media. They haven’t drawn any consequence out of it.”* (Guyot et al., 2006 : 30)

- The issues surrounding journalistic ethical standards related to the use of images were raised in at least two different contexts : on the one hand, urban unrest, terrorism and warfare; on the other, interference within people’s private sphere. Regarding the first aspect, taking the example of suburban unrest in 2005, France 2 television noticed that the main problem was to find the right treatment between *“too much or too little information”* with a recent change towards what he calls : *“The ethics of responsibility, (...) a collective decision “not to broadcast information about the number of burnt cars to avoid drifting off towards overbid from the young who were burning vehicles.”* (Guyot and al., 2006 : 23).

Irish journalists share some similar concerns when they decide not to show everything, questioning “the role of broadcasters in assessing visual material which could have been

generated as part of terrorist propaganda, and other questions of an editorial nature such as the use of embedded journalists“ (Horgan, 2006 : 31) In Great Britain, journalists point out the responsibility to publish or not photographs of demonstrations that allow the police to identify protestors or explicit pictures of dismembered bodies from war zones. (Preston, 2006 : 44).

Journalists are found to practice self-censorship in several respects. As far as privacy is concerned, most journalists view in a very negative way the general trend to get into people’s private life, should be they known or not. An Irish journalist mentions the case of the death of the MP Liam Lawlor in a car crash in Moscow and the salacious report made by a number of Sunday papers. (Horgan, 2006 : 31). The quest for sensationalism is very common, with the interviews pointing to many examples of media intrusion in people’s privacy posing questions about the violation of several basic human rights : examples range from David Beckham’s private life (Preston , 2006 : 43) to the Royal Dutch family, diplomats or ordinary folks (Kovács and al. 2006, 22).

The ways in which controversial issues are dealt with may help shed light on the balance of powers inside media; says a French journalist : *“It precisely depends on the “weight” of journalists in their company. When the professional code of ethics, particularly the respect for truth – prevails over all other economic considerations, people’s right of information is respected. When commercial or private interests are dominant, the journalist can only choose between resignation or self-censorship.”* (Guyot and al. 2006 : 24)

Implications for the practice and study of journalism

The analysis of the literature review and interviews of media professionals allows to identify certain general trends which are important in understanding the changes in journalistic cultures and practices. At this stage, let us give a brief summary of these main trends.

How is it to work as a journalist?

Many journalists acknowledge new forms of censorship, at least when talking about their colleagues, even if they are reluctant to talk about their own personal experiences. Censorship takes more subtle ways than before, not only in former communists countries that were used to more direct and immediate pressures from their governments.

Today, journalists face a mixture of growing economic pressures as well as older and newer forms of political attempts at influencing the news agenda. Within media organisations, the direct agency of influence is often assumed by the “middle managers“ who act as buffers between the owners and the journalists. The relevant influences may also arise from the friendly and sustained relationships between media owners or top executives and politicians. In any case, it seems that journalists now tend to face more subtle or implicit nudges rather than explicit instructions to change the editorial line or modify some of the content of news coverage.

For well-established journalists in national media, the relevant pressures, whether they come from owners, advertisers or politicians or combinations of these acting in a consensus forged by common interests, comprise an open secret. The result often takes the form of self-censorship amongst media professionals who interiorize political, economic, and market-based constraints. However, through their unions and professional bodies, the occupation tries to defend editorial independence and above all media pluralism.

Indeed, the most pressing challenges journalists have to cope with concern the security of their jobs, professional autonomy as well as the protection of press freedom in the face of

media concentration and commercialisation trends. Usually, company mergers and media restructuring lead to drastic cost reductions affecting staff working conditions. The first consequence is the increase of short-term, cross-media contracts. This major change does not seem to affect the new generation of journalists who take it for granted that the job is permanently modified by IC technologies, thus pushing them to find other sources of revenue. This generation gap illustrates how journalistic cultures built through the adhesion to collective values (for example the editorial responsibility shared by the members of a news desk) are dissolving in favour of more individualistic approaches : in this respect, the freelance journalist may become a new professional archetype.

However, interviews reveal that most journalists are not satisfied by the present situation and believe legal measures should be taken to limit the trends towards media concentration, advertising and commercialisation processes. Two directions are privileged. On the one hand, a need for regulation policies from national and international authorities in order to provide a firmer legal framework to guarantee editorial and financial independence. On the other hand, the provision of professional training to all journalists so they can better resist economic and political pressures.

These claims reflect a certain crisis of identity experienced by most journalists. Many feel they have lost their legitimacy because their ability to make the news according to the professional standards of journalism is threatened by the growing sway of markets forces.

Political economy as a research prospect for journalism studies.

Obviously, political economic factors play an important role in journalistic cultures. Many interviewees indicate that they have integrated this dimension, they are aware that the capitalistic organization of media shapes their practices and the forms of professional discretion or leeway left to them.

In this particular context, political economy explanatory approaches can highlight the dynamics of “advanced capitalism”. Special attention must be paid to journalism in order to assess media pluralism but also to take into account the strategies journalists display in order to face the consequences of concentration and monopolization on editorial freedom. This comparative survey helps to identify and categorize the major trends or evolutions in journalistic practices in European countries.

One last point concerns the education and training of journalists. Most curricula offered in journalism schools do not include courses dedicated to these political economic factors, or to changes brought by the internationalization of cultural industries --and above all to the ways media professionals may deal with them. Unfortunately, the reference to the ideals of the profession does not have much sense when most journalists work in globalized media subject to subtle if pervasive commercial influences. The theoretical and empirical contributions of political economy research can help future journalists to engage with new challenges to building a democratic social and political order.

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