

The interaction of journalist and media owner in the journalism culture of Albania

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Introduction

The following paper aims to analyze the relationship of journalists and media owners in Albania, theoretically and empirically. The main thesis of the paper is that journalists as well as media owners should be treated as actors with their own pragmatic interests, which tend by these interests and build their relationship on the basis of their compliance or not. Because journalists do not work in a vacuum. During their daily job they encounter restrictions and influences that impact the product, i.e. the output they present to the audience at various degrees.¹

These influences may be visible such as self-regulation or the code of ethics, but also invisible within the newsroom, such as censorship and professional ethos. We should not neglect the influence of the audience, the sources and the deadlines for delivering finished products because as McQuail notes "*the content is systematically and seemingly influenced by organizational routines, practices and intentions, more than personal or ideological factors*"². So, if some time during the communist regime the journalists faced a series of barriers typical of totalitarian systems, nowadays the barriers are of a different nature.

The starting point for this article was data obtained from an extensive survey of Albanian journalists (Population = 295) in eight

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¹ McQuail, Denis. 2000. *Mass Communication Theory*. New York: SAGE Publications, s. 244.

² Ibid.

cities during 2012, as part of an international study about journalism cultures "Worlds of Journalism Study"³. To closely evidence which factors influence Albanian journalists, during the survey they were asked to rate various sources from 1 to 5, where 1 meant not influential and 5, extremely influential.

The Journalist as an Actor

When we talk about the "actors" in journalism we have to explain the framework of the terminology we use. The audience expects to see the journalist in the role of *homo sociologicus*⁴, to inform precisely quickly, and impartially⁵. Every journalist (as part of a collective) works under different pressures, influenced by the commercial interests of the media he or she works for (indirectly, by the audience), and the personal interests: to maximize social and financial capital *ashomo economicus*. This logic is obvious in the way socialization happens inside the newsroom. A journalist who just graduated and approaches a media company "breaks" the principles learned in theory, that there are two ways: to confront the problem in a direct manner (conflict!), or adapt (violence of the collective!).

This interaction of the individual with the collective happens through written or unwritten "rules" and "obligations," which are defining for one's future behavior within the professional environment. The more "gain" each actor sees in the interaction, the better the socialization, the "molding", works. In other words, the socialization process generates conformity. A journalist may be satisfied with a low salary as long as his/her job is safe. This situation satisfies both him/her and the owner of the media company. The examples from show us that *harmony* gets out of balance when one

³ Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) see further Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) or <http://www.worldsofjournalism.org>

⁴Schimank, Uwe. 2005. *Differenzierung und Integration der modernen Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur akteurzentrierten Differenzierungstheorie*. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, pg. 37-121.

⁵ In fact, even the owners or the newsroom executives have similar expectations from journalists: they expect them to be obedient.

actor tries to gain to the detriment of the other. Lack of compromise can lead to conflict, but also to radical solutions.⁶In this case, foreign intervention (from institutional rules and codes, decided and accepted by everyone) remains the only choice.

This interrelatedness of forces in a general *biotope* makes journalists more cautious in everyday professional practices. On the one hand they “officially” advertise the normative principles of journalism (for instance, when they are asked about the role and function of journalism in society), and on the other hand they follow a (real) *journalistic doxa* which dominates their habitat: perceptible and imperceptible practices which are at times conveyed, but followed by everyone.

Typology of the Media Owner

Based on Schimank's agency typology above, we may perceive the journalist as an actor who is confronted with social interdependence, which may be symmetrical and asymmetrical⁷. Symmetrical means that actors might not be very dependent on each other, but have more freedom of action and decision-making. But when the interdependence between a journalist and media owner is asymmetrical, conflict will arise. Both the journalist and the media owner are social actors that play a role in society. The owner of a media enables the publication of a newspaper or medium, employs journalists and offers a product: a newspaper, a magazine, a TV, a

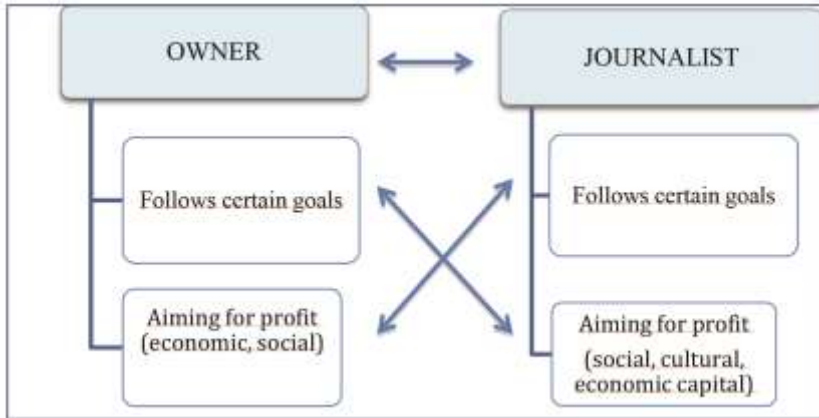
⁶ One radical solution has been applied in the case of one of the largest newspapers in Albania, “Shekulli,” in the summer of 2012, when its staff resigned after failing to receive salaries for months and thus stopped the publishing of the paper. Previously, in similar situations, collective members reached a compromise with the publisher and all the journalists returned to work. But in the 2012 case, the collective was determined in its action, while the publisher refused to compromise and became editor in chief and the only reporter in the newsroom.

⁷ Schimank, Uwe. 2000. *Handeln und Strukturen: Einführung in die akteurtheoretische Soziologie*. Bündingen: JUVENTA, s. 83.

radio and so on. This product, on the other hand, grants one an audience and participation in public debate.

In Albania so far, the journalist-owner relationship has been discussed as conflictual, and not interactive (Fig. 1). The owner has his/her own intentions, which are driven towards profit (cost-profit calculations). The journalist also follows his/her own intentions driven towards profit (social capital, symbolic capital etc.). Above all, both actors move in a small space and market such as Albania.

Figure1. Expectations of actors: owner and journalist



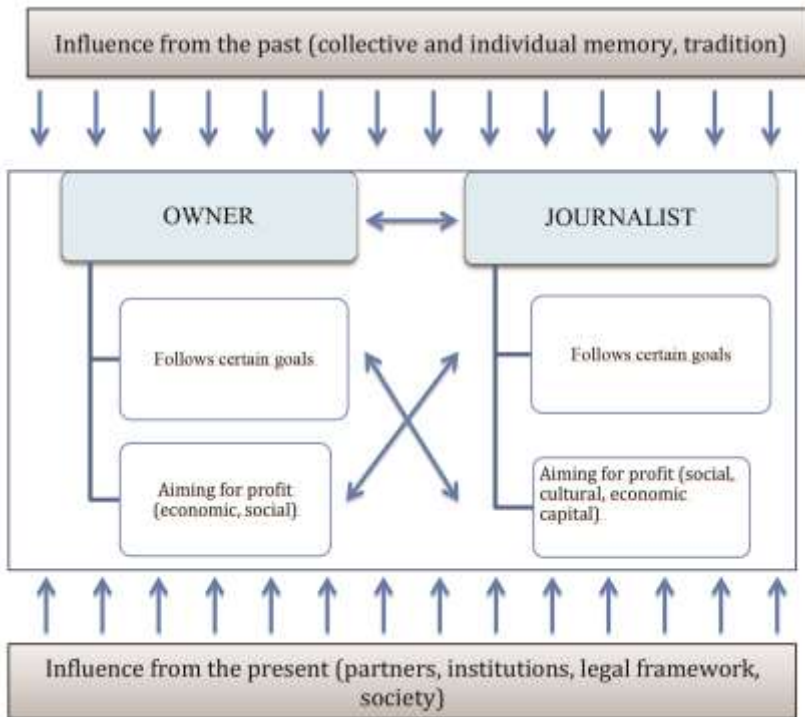
Both parties are burdened by their legacy of individual and collective memories: a) *the state acted as the owner in communism, with undeniable control over the media, turning to repression in case of defiance;* b) *the journalist served to the state and conformed to the rules.*

In the cultural memory of today's owners, the media dependency on its "owner" (state) may awake the feeling of conformity for survival reasons (and facility). Because as Goffman notes, whoever is not able to adapt to the "scheme", is a non-functional actor (1956)⁸. We need to modify the figure above by showing the influence the past has had on actors in the field of journalism as well as their expectations. This clash of expectations or conflict between actors devises consensus and reduces the personal "eligible area" in relation to others.

⁸Goffman, Erving. 1990/1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin books.

In Figure 2, we see the influence of the past (professional ethos) and the present (competitors, colleagues, legal framework, but even family, social circle etc.) on media actors. Each of the actors is not just an individual or a collective, but a chain of individual and communal reactions and expectations. Actors act continuously in the exchange between “role making” (role fulfilling) and “role taking” (fulfilling of expectations of individuals and social groups, i.e. the collective).

Figure2. Expectations of actors under influence from the past and the present



During the communist regime, journalists worked in function of “role taking” which was clearly defined by the state (propaganda). Today they are faced with the dilemma of “role taking” and “role making”. High-ranking journalists in the professional hierarchy find it easier to exert “role making” compared to reporters who start work at a younger age, for instance. However this does not exclude directors, editors in chief and the like from various other conflicts.

Journalists and the media owners in Albania suffer from “limited rationality,” or the lack of rationality, which worsens problems and makes them either unsolvable or requiring radical solutions. As we see in the two schemes, actors are dependent upon the expectations of each other. Thus, a media owner should know the expectations of journalists, employees, business partners, politicians, social circle, competitors, media monitoring institutions, the legal framework and so on. On their part, journalists should know what to expect from the owner, the legal framework, politics, social circle, colleagues in one's or other media, media monitoring institutions and so on. Both the journalist and the media owner become carriers of chain reactions to personal expectations for themselves and the others. Due to the “historical memory” that weighs upon the model of relationships of these two actors in Albania, the conflict between them stays concealed, latent, and pushes them often into conflict that is later followed by a legitimacy crisis. In order to solve this crisis, according to Schimank, actors must clearly define their role⁹. To play the role, each needs sufficient sources, and their role should coincide with their perception and expectations, as “[t]he pressure of expectations is especially decisive when explaining the conflicts between interrelated roles”¹⁰.

We are accustomed to reduce the state of journalism in Albania to a cause and effect relationship, where the journalists suffer under ownership and politics (by way of favoritism). But, as we tried to explain earlier, social structures affect the attitude of actors, including

⁹ Schimank, Uwe. 2000. *Handeln und Strukturen: Einführung in die akteurtheoretische Soziologie*. Bündingen: JUVENTA, p. 55.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 56.

their motives and means of expression. On the other hand, the actions of actors influence the social structure by creating expectations, perceptions, and specific values.

Research Questions

This paper analyzes the relationship between journalists and media owners in Albania. Based on the theoretical part, the aim is to discover how this relationship works. The main thesis of the paper was that journalists and media owners should be treated as actors in their own narrow interests, which tend by these interests and build their relationship on the basis of their compliance or not. Given the empirical data we can ask these research questions: *Does affected journalists from media owners? As they perceive the impact, if any? Are there differences in perception depending on the hierarchy of the journalists?*

Method

To answer these questions, this study examines data from a survey conducted in eight regions in Albania¹¹. The interviewed journalists (295) were chosen from each news organization, representing three levels of newsroom hierarchy: general reporters (non-management level), senior editors and desk-heads (middle-level management) and chief editors or directors (senior managers). News organizations were selected following a common scheme in order to include the widest and most inclusive representation of the Albanian media system, both national and regional. Broadcast media were selected based on ownership criteria: public and private. Entertainment media outlets (as Radio DJ) and other formats, dealing not with daily information processing were excluded. The 295 fully standardized surveys were conducted mostly face-to-face (92%), by telephone (7%) or online (1%).

Among others, the respondents were asked to value the influence of different sources they were presented. They were given again five alternatives from 1 to 5, where 1 means not influential and 5

¹¹Godole, Jonila. *Gazetaria shqiptare në tranzicion*. Tiranë: Papirus. 2014.

extremely influential. Finally, in order to better understand the survey data, in-depth interviews were conducted with the most prominent women journalists in Albania and combined with the analysis of the survey to strengthen the main points.

RESULTS

Sources of influence for journalists

Reporters asked in the survey about the impact on journalists from within the editorial offered answers which can be grouped into four main dimensions: the impact of editorial policy which is appreciated by over half of the journalists asked (53%), the influence of the leaders editorial (43%), the influence that comes from media owners (39%) and the impact of the high level of media management (general director, etc).

Graphic 1: Influential factors of the editorial structure (% of responses "very influential" and "extremely important")



The owners of news organizations rank right after editors in chief in terms of influence, not before them like it has been in other surveys with a smaller sample conducted by the Media Institute. Some of the responses seem to be contradicting each other at first consideration. Earlier, we saw that politics (politicians and government officials, etc.)

is not evaluated as a very influential source, while here the “editorial policy” is relatively more influential. This hints at policies media publishers follow, but indirectly also the influence of politics over them. The weight is higher compared to “media owners as sources of influence” for instance, which reminds us again that journalists’ responses to direct questions do not always correspond to what they really think.

The perception of interference by experienced journalists

Interviews with experienced Albanian journalists suggest a different story. In their perception, the influence of media owners over journalists can be operationalized in three main dimensions: interference because of political considerations, interference because of personal profit expectations, and interference as a coercive tool against business and political competitors in general. So, Ilva Tare, for example, states journalism, both yesterday and nowadays, is continually at risk of becoming a tool in the hands of media owners, from the political power¹². Similarly, Alba Malltezi notes that “the role of journalism is seriously hindered by the dominance of media-tools in the hands of owners whose primary intention is to raise personal wealth and protect their other economic activities”¹³. Xhaxhiu goes further by calling the media “a rusty pistol in their hands”¹⁴.

Referring to the way the owners influence journalists, Çipa speaks of their intervention with direct telephone calls or their physical presence in the newsroom¹⁵ (2012). The most particular damage caused to Albanian journalism is the influence of politics on journalists through their owners. One prominent journalist, Alfred Peza, argues that political influence is manifested mainly in the unification of media proprietorship with editorial posts, which attests the close the inseparable link between media and politics in Albania.

¹² Interview with the journalist Ilva Tare, 2012.

¹³ Interview with the journalist and media director Alba Malltezi, 2012.

¹⁴ Interview with the journalist Rezear Xhaxhiu, 2012.

¹⁵ Interview with the Head of Journalists Union, Aleksander Cipa, 2012.

"It is not enough for owners to be simple owners, but they want to construct the short links with politics, without journalists' mediation. All other problems derive from this basic problem". How does this short link work? It generally works by populating executive and managing positions in the media with people who are in the circle of the owners' close friends or their relatives"¹⁶.

Conclusions

As a conclusion we can say that the relationship between the journalist and media owner is mutual. If today we can say that "the guard dog of democracy is returned in a guard dog of the owners!" this happened in full agreement of the journalists and the media owners. The journalist chooses a role oriented its benefits (of the moment, or long). Militancy to a party, or the owners' interests by Alexander Furxhi labeled as "security komardare for journalists working in the interests of certain political or business"¹⁷. On the other hand, the politicization of journalists and their relationship seems clear policy on Albanian journalists desire to have power (political). At this point, the journalist and politician aligned with policy. Therefore, the journalist could not hold it is recommended distance between media and politics:

"Today, journalists write news before the screen where he comes face the owner and he has interests in business and politics. If the story in question is related to any of them, enter into self-censorship game. Therefore the news is turning into a parade of

achievements and successes or in a mirror without depth and argued the situation [...]"¹⁸.

¹⁶ During the interview (June 2012), Alfred Peza was director of Vizion + TV, while currently he is a Socialist Party MP elected on June 23, 2013.

¹⁷ Interview with the journalist Aleksander Furxhi, 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with Ilva Tare, 2012.

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