

Schools of Political Studies
Thematic meetings during the World Forum of Democracy (3-7 November)

Professional Group Meeting
“Journalism today – a dangerous job?”
6 November 2014
Synopsis¹

Some 25 media representatives, experts and students from Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia (V4), Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, Montenegro, as well as representatives from Kosovo* took part in the discussion. The speakers in the session were **Anne NIVAT**, award-winning author and warzone correspondent who worked in Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine; and **Piotr ZALEWSKI**, Istanbul-based correspondent for Polish magazine *Polityka*, contributor to major international media, and editor at European Stability Initiative.

Key trends of today’s media landscape were indicated by **Daniel HÖLTGEN**, Spokesperson of the Council of Europe’s Secretary General and moderator of the meeting, and expanded and discussed by the participants. The trends identified were the following: a transfer from analytical to ‘breaking news’ journalism; fast emergence and increasing power of social media and citizen journalism; growing influence on media from the state and big business; self-censorship applied by journalists, and a lack of impartial and objective reporting from conflict zones. The trends below were subsequently discussed in groups and reported on to the full meeting.

Social media vs traditional journalism: “If anybody can tweet, what becomes of us?”

Participants debated the emerging social media and citizen journalism, the opportunities it creates, and the threats and dangers it poses. A related problem is the growing prevalence of breaking news – type stories over analytics.

Participants noted a **number of positive aspects of citizen journalism**:

- Citizen journalism is an incentive for traditional journalists to be more professional, create real insights into the story;
- It offers traditional journalists a new source of information – tweets or bloggers’ posts;
- Social media and citizen journalism are more difficult to control, they are relatively unbiased and are more trusted;-
- Social media are more responsive and flexible;
- Often social media are the only source to receive information, when other media are forced to be silent;
- Social media are live and interactive, unlike traditional media.

On the **negative side**, the participants noted that:

- Audience dictates what kind of information to convey and leads the debate, not the other way around;
- Citizen journalists often lack professional skills, but at the same time push traditional journalists out of the profession, which leads to an overall lowering of the professional level of journalists;

¹ Notes taken by Tatiana Baeva (DC)

[*All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.]

- More information does not always mean better information: Twitter style messaging cannot replace deep analytical articles;
- Citizen journalists often go to conflict zones unaware and unprepared, putting their lives at risk;
- Social media only reach a limited segment of the population;
- The problem of fake profiles and ‘trolls’ and littering social media discussions is difficult to tackle.

Media ownership and editorial (in)dependence: “Erasing the fine line between PR and journalism”

Self-censorship, agenda-driven editorial policies, shifting taboos and their life cycle in various countries – these are just some of the issues that were raised by the participants.

Main observations included the following:

- Media are increasingly under pressure from the politicians and businesses that finance them;
- Due to pressure, journalists have to be selective and can report objectively only on the regions and events not directly impacting the owners’ interests;
- There are various taboo themes imposed by editors on reporters, based on their owners’ relations with the authorities, participation in public procurement tenders and political ambitions;
- Violence and repression against journalists reporting on ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘unauthorised’ matters occurs frequently and remains unpunished;
- Readers and viewers are often unaware of who owns certain media outlets and/or do not make this connection when watching news or reading a newspaper.

Participants of the discussion offered ideas on addressing these issues, among them **creating an international watchdog** to monitor all media companies and report cases of misapplication of national laws and international standards, obliging media companies to clearly announce their ownership structure; using subscription and raising “soft money” from the audience to finance their existence; and – for journalists – moving to freelancing which may be less stable, less paid and more risky, but would allow more freedom in reporting.

The participants concluded that **full independence of a media outlet is hardly realistic** even in advanced democracies, control will always exist, and editors will always need to balance between the need to be objective and the need to pay salaries to the staff. “But if we don’t dare to report objectively, if we don’t risk our lives, there will be no journalism, just PR left,” Anne NIVAT said at the end of the discussion.

Reporting on the conflict or being a part of it: “Thousand shades of grey in any war story”

The participants included journalists from Ukraine and Russia, countries which are currently in the state of a “proxy war”, as well as journalists from neighbouring countries – Moldova, Belarus and Georgia. Therefore, the question whether one can – and should – cover the conflict in an impartial manner if one’s country is a part of this conflict, was actively debated.

The participants noted that the **propaganda war** going on in parallel with the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia is unprecedented. It is extremely difficult for media, especially those that cannot afford to have correspondents on the ground, to find objective sources of information, and for journalists in the war zone to remain impartial. A conflict, if it goes on long enough, eventually impacts on relations with the people “on the other side”. This happens at the

personal level, it ruins professional solidarity and it can result in journalists taking up guns, suggested some participants of the session. This deepens the divide in the media community and society as a whole, instead of bridging it.

While no universal advice can be given, “**the audience, the facts, the quotes and the respect**” must be a **guiding principle** of any journalist reporting on conflict. One should not judge or accuse, and should always keep in mind the audience ‘behind your shoulder’. There is no black or white in any war story, it is always a picture of thousand shades of grey. The moment a journalist yields to passion, he can be easily manipulated, and “the moment the journalist touches the gun, he’s not a journalist anymore, but a warrior,” said Anne NIVAT. A personal view can be presented in a personal capacity, for example through social media and blogs.

The participants welcomed the Council of Europe’s initiative to be launched in March 2015 of a web portal collecting facts on cases of intimidation and harassment against journalists.