

Communication Science

Under the eye of the Fourth Estate

by Hubert Filser



At the center of the conflict: Bulgarian journalists interview a pro-Russian separatist in Slavyansk (Eastern Ukraine) at the end of April 2014." *Source: Scott Olson/Getty*

Western media often see their task as that of an independent monitor of the political sphere. How true is this of the press elsewhere? LMU's Thomas Hanitzsch, coordinator of a worldwide survey of journalists' attitudes to their role, has the answer.

In Thomas Hanitzsch's office hangs a certificate inscribed in gold Cyrillic letters, which was recently presented to him in St. Petersburg. Hanitzsch, a media researcher at LMU Munich, is an internationally respected personality. After all, he was responsible for initiating the "Worlds of Journalism" study. Global in scope and the largest of its type ever undertaken, it has recruited participants in over 80 countries. Its purpose is to establish and evaluate, using polling techniques, how journalists in various parts of the world see themselves and their professional role. How strongly are they influenced by market trends, what standards of quality do they uphold? How independent are they of the power centers in politics and societies? How do they view their function in conflict situations? "The survey gives us insight into how journalists actually tick," says Hanitzsch, who is coordinating the exercise.

Such a comprehensively designed analysis is particularly appropriate at a time when the media landscape is undergoing radical upheaval. Working conditions for journalists are changing dramatically everywhere; economic pressures are rising; as resources dwindle, quality journalism is under threat in many places. "I myself was surprised by the level of approval and encouragement for the

study," Hanitzsch remarks. "It was not intended to become so big."

During its first stage, which lasted until 2011, the researchers received responses from 2100 journalists in 21 countries, from Australia to China, Egypt, Brazil and the US. The scope of the study has since grown substantially. In the current phase, 1000 journalists in Germany alone are contributing to the investigation. "It has been a great surprise to discover just how varied perceptions of journalism are in different parts of the world," says Hanitzsch. Overall the researchers have distilled four distinct profiles from their data. Journalists in Arab countries, for instance, want to exert an overt influence on their society, not only via their function as publicists, but as active partisans with a specific program. "In Egypt, for example, they take on a directly political role in society at large," says Hanitzsch. Attitudes that would be regarded as unprofessional in Germany are expected of journalists in Arab countries. In their stories, staff writers make it clear which side, in their opinion, has the better arguments in any given case. They see themselves as drivers of change and revolution.

In Western countries, by contrast, the dominant ideal is that of the neutral observer, the media as the Fourth Estate,

defending democracy by holding the powerful to account. In Asia and Africa, one finds many countries in which journalists have a strong tendency to regard themselves as educators. "We refer to this as developmental journalism", says Hanitzsch. This often means that journalists support powerful elites in the hope that they will lead society at large to economic prosperity.

"In future, journalists will take a more active part in shaping everyday life."

But sometimes journalists who promote government policies can become its lackeys, placing less emphasis on free expression and the freedom of the press for the sake of economic advantage. According to the study, this description fits about 70% of journalists in Uganda, and more than half of their counterparts in China and Indonesia. The fourth type is what Hanitzsch calls a kind of populist news gatherer. This species is found especially in Romania, Bulgaria and Russia, but also in Israel and Spain, all of them societies which are undergoing fundamental change. Modern journalism has tended to concentrate heavily on politics, Hanitzsch points out. "But," he says, "in future, journalists will take a more active part in shaping everyday life." The power of the institutions that have traditionally

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inculcated values and provided direction – family, education, religion – is diminishing. In the resulting vacuum, the media are acquiring an increasingly important function. Journalists are assuming the role of guides to a world dominated by consumerism, selling news that the buyer can use. “One sign of this trend,” says Hanitzsch, “is the increased attention being paid to prominent personalities, who provide orientation in a world of complex lifestyles. Large numbers of periodicals and magazine programs on TV are now specifically targeted to the reader or viewer as consumer and not primarily to the politically aware citizen. “This is good for advertisers, because it facilitates product placement,” he adds, but it often compromises journalistic independence.

During the second phase of “Worlds of Journalism”, he and his team hope to

define further types of role model. For instance, journalists are playing a growing role in conflict situations. “We in the West expect reporters to be non-partisan, not to favor one side or otherwise fan the flames,” Hanitzsch says. “But we forget that journalists always write for a particular readership, which is often defined by ethnic or religious allegiance, and these readers expect them to wave the right flag” – in countries experiencing ethnic or religious tensions or military confrontations. Journalism relies on a degree of trust between the informant and the reader. If journalists in war zones are truly impartial, they risk losing that trust – which doesn’t make serious and considered war reporting any easier.

Western journalists are also not immune to such pressures. There is a notable trend toward so-called peace journalism. Based on what they learned from the

war in Bosnia, during which Western forces stood idly by as atrocities were committed, reporters have developed the attitude that the West should always intervene. “In my view, that is a problematic stance. “It is not the media’s job to take sides in conflicts; there are other institutions for that, Hanitzsch asserts. “What happens if journalists take the wrong side?” The conditions under which reporters have to work in war zones often make it impossible to be fully informed about all that is going on. Access to certain regions or specific types of information is often restricted. The current crisis in the Ukraine is only one example. “Truly impartial reporting is then impossible,” he warns. In spite of such hindrances, German media have learned to report on conflict situations with a relatively high degree of fairness, he adds. “In comparison with the media in the US, we are in a pretty good position.”

Prof. Dr. Thomas Hanitzsch
Professor of Communication Science (with a focus on Journalism) at LMU. He has recently been chosen as Senior Researcher in Residence at LMU’s Center for Advanced Studies (CAS), a post which he will take up in October. 