

Guest Editor's introduction



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This issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* includes eight articles from Estonia (1), Hungary (1), Poland (4), Sweden (1), and Ukraine (1). The first two by Henrik Örnebring (Sweden) and Sylwia Męcfal (Poland) focus on journalists and the ethical issues of paying for news and the involvement of local journalists in relationships with politicians and elites that might compromise their independence. The next four articles by Dariya Orlova and Daria Taradai (Ukraine), Päivi Tampere et al. (Estonia), Jakub Nowak (Poland), and Jakub Parnes (Poland) deal with the internet and its use by and impact on journalists and the public. The last two articles by Anamaria Neag (Hungary) and Krzysztof Wasilewski (Poland) are concerned with media literacy education and the role of media discourse in contributing to historical narratives. This is a diverse, eclectic set of articles, but all of them are concerned with the quality of news media reporting and the effects of this reporting on public knowledge, understanding, public affairs and history.

Henrik Örnebring's article is based on interviews with journalists and public relations practitioners in 10 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. He finds that the continued existence of the practice of journalists taking money to write puff pieces for businesses or political actors, without indicating that the content is paid for, can be seen as a sign of a weak professional culture among journalists and among PR professionals as well. He identifies two key factors that contribute to the persistence of the practice of paid news. The first is the integration between journalism and PR in most of the countries, especially since the financial crisis of 2008–09, which is manifested in the fairly common practice of freelancers working in journalism and PR. The second factor is the incentive to maintain this practice for both journalists and PR practitioners. Örnebring quotes one Lithuanian respondent who pointed out that “the newspapers get more money and the politicians/businessmen get positive coverage — everybody wins except the citizens”. Increased professionalization would mean loss of an additional source of income for journalists and loss of an important channel of communication for PR professionals, but it is very important for citizens and journalism educators to keep pushing for more professionalism, in my view, if we care about an informed public and democracy.

Sylwia Męćfal's article is based on case studies in four small towns in Poland. She finds that the local elites, especially political and local governmental, are the ones who have the most influence on media content, but there are different kinds of relations between journalists and elites in different towns — from open political engagement to apparent non-engagement to actual non-engagement, and from symmetrical to non-symmetrical or one-sided relationships. Męćfal concludes that political engagement of the press does not strengthen the independence of journalists to serve the public, but rather that the economic strength and power of the news media may lead to the abuse of power.

The next four articles focus on the internet and social media. Dariya Orlova and Daria Taradai find that in Ukraine journalists used social media more actively as media freedom was deteriorating, but there was confusion among Ukrainian journalists regarding the role of public debate on Facebook during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign. On the one hand, many journalists found comments by the public on Facebook irrelevant and did not respond to them. On the other hand, journalists referred to the added value of comments. The authors conclude that this lack of engagement by journalists is an indicator that public debate on Facebook was not satisfying the criteria of the public sphere in Ukraine in 2012–13, but Facebook did provide an alternative public space in Ukraine, in contrast to the ever more controlled mainstream media under President Yanukovych.

This conclusion that Facebook did not fulfill Habermas's criteria for a public sphere (inclusiveness, rationality, autonomy, lack of hierarchy) is echoed by Jakub Parnes in his study of online media in Poland. He concludes that online civil discourse in Poland does not meet the conditions of Habermas's model of the public sphere because the rapid expansion of the number of network users in Poland during the past decade was not accompanied by equally rapid growth in their competence in using information and communication technologies. He found that many Polish internet users limit themselves to passive use of network resources, and the vast majority use the internet to express their opinions without interacting with other citizens. He argues, however, that online discussions have many more participants than traditional ones and are more inclusive and egalitarian than many discussions organized by scientific or socio-cultural institutions, and that several years ago the opinions and proposals of those who really are interested in critical debates would not have gone beyond conversations with friends and family.

Päivi Tampere and colleagues from Tallinn University in Estonia study the impact of social media activism in the conflict between a supermarket chain and Estonian customers in April 2010. They find, by analyzing social media and mass media texts as well as press releases, that citizens had power in this conflict because of their ability to raise questions, be critical of company behavior, and to define the crisis using social media. But the authors caution that the news media role in this conflict must not be underestimated. Social media can become the initiator of so-

cial movements, but the traditional news media are often necessary for reinforcing (raising the salience) of the definition of an issue.

The last of these four articles focusing on the internet is by Jakub Nowak. He reviews shifts in the roles of media users given increasing opportunities for participation in the formation of media content via the internet. He proposes a theoretical concept of internet meme that combines traditional (vertical and industry-originated) and new (horizontal and peer-produced) modes of media production and consumption, and relates this idea of internet meme to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication. He argues that instead of a simple binary division between industry and audiences, there is a new system today that is much more complicated and unstable.

Anamaria Neag's article attempts to position media literacy in a broader theoretical context by relying on two of the founders of modern social thought — Mill and Rousseau. She draws parallels between the goals of media literacy education (e.g., the development of critical thinking) and Rousseau's writings on modern education, and she uses Mill's concept of utility to argue that media literacy serves its purpose because it helps to educate people to reach a higher level of knowledge. She provides a thorough review of articles that can be considered the theoretical foundation of media literacy.

The last article in this issue by Krzysztof Wasilewski analyzes the impact of media discourse on people's understanding of history, a process that he calls the "sacralization of history" where one narrative of history becomes dominant and is associated with religion and universal stories of the conflict between good and evil. The author argues that the use of certain words associated with religion is a kind of media framing of events from Poland's recent past, and that any criticism of the dominant framing is considered blasphemy and treason. He hypothesizes that the greater the need of national unity, the stronger the sacralization of the national past, not only in Poland but in other nations as well, and that sacralization of history by the media strengthens the rule of the majority.

In short, these eight articles provide thought-provoking ideas regarding journalism's ethics, uses and effects. Some of these ideas are not tested rigorously with empirical data, but they provide questions and hypotheses for further empirical research to answer and test, not only in CEE countries but more widely as well.