Journalists under attack: self-censorship as an unperceived method for avoiding hostility

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Abstract: This study investigates journalists' self-censorship and introduces a phenomenon of unperceived collective self-censorship that demands a combination of detection methods. We conducted a content analysis of media critique texts (N=156) that discuss attacks on Estonian journalism. These results were combined with the content analysis of journalistic roles in the news (N=2409) and a survey on journalists (N=99) and completed with semi-structured interviews (N=14). The findings showed that accusations against journalists were frequently related to discourses regarding journalists' interventionist or watchdog roles. Juxtaposing these results with quantitative data, it became evident that when aspects of interventionist and watchdog roles were criticized in the media texts, the performance of these roles decreased in the news. However, journalists' self-assessment does not show the perception of this change. We argue that self-censorship was created unknowingly within the newsroom. External pressures – such as politically motivated attacks on journalism – may promote unperceived self-censorship.

Keywords: self-censorship; journalistic role performance; journalism; attacks on journalism

INTRODUCTION

Media freedom in European Union countries stem from the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which considers media freedom is a fundamental right. Similar to other constitutions, Estonia's states there shall not be any censorship, following the definition according to which it means suppression or prohibition of ideas and free speech by the institutions and authorities. However, the concept of self-censorship differs from censorship. Censorship relies on censors (e.g., the state, an organization) which use direct measures on the censored to suppress

their freedom of speech. By comparison, self-censorship is individual-centered, or as Bar-Tal (2017) posits is an act when people intentionally and voluntarily suppress information from others when formal impediments are absent. The individual-centered aspect of self-censorship ensures its process and motivation are complex and difficult to comprehend. It is also why concepts explaining the phenomenon are severely diffused (Davis, 2020; Hughes, 2017; Iordanidou et al., 2020).

For example, it can be public or private (Cook & Heilmann, 2010); it can be confused with following norms (e.g., ethics) and therefore directing oneself accordingly, including dropping a newsworthy topic (Schimpfössl et al., 2020). Therefore, we partly rely on Bar-Tal (2017), who emphasizes that self-censorship means withholding information that has a wider societal value; however, when referring to withholding it, we rely on explaining the motivation behind it. According to Gans (1979), self-censorship is a method for preventing the potential reaction from 'non-journalists' (p. 250), including receiving hostility from the sources, audience members, and dealing with litigation (Ivask 2020). We argue, and rely on Gans (1979), that self-censorship can be an unrecognized method for preventing consequences among journalists. Unrecognizability can be explained with the help of the emotion management concept, according to which people can adapt practices at the workplace without recognizing it – Hochschild (1983, p. 35) calls it "deep acting". We argue that deep acting is possible with self-censorship as well, as Gans (1979) points out.

Journalism studies scholars have done much-appreciated work delving into the causes that lead to self-censoring practices and analyzing the implications self-censorship brings (Fadnes et al., 2020). Intimidation and harassment have shown to have consequences on journalists' autonomy and self-censorship in authoritarian and democratic countries alike, where journalists choose silence over fulfilling the watchdog role (Ivask, 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Riives et al., 2021). Additional to physical threats and violence, digital hostility has been revealed as a substantial way of pressurizing journalists (e.g., United Nations, 2021). But there are also pressures of political power (Barrios & Miller, 2021; Yesil, 2014), the commercial interests of the publishers (Balčytienė & Lauk, 2005) or media organizations' conditions (e.g., Kotisova & Waschková Císařová, 2021), which all, in one way or another, influence journalists. The motivation behind self-censorship is not only to avoid abuse and uncomfortable situations, but also to please the management for possible promotion (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2009). However, in this article we focus on influencing pressures outside the newsroom – the audience and sources of information.

Research of the self-censorship phenomenon has diverse approaches, all of which have limitations, which illustrate why it is challenging to study self-censorship. Quantitative methods lead to challenges with the sample (who

gets the survey, who provides answers, how to keep the sample balanced); the researchers do not know who is answering the survey and how understandable the survey questions/statements are to a respondent (e.g. Bodrunova et al., 2021; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Other researchers have used qualitative questionnaires or e-mail interviews, where respondents are expected to be motivated to report on the issues (e.g., Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017); there are issues with follow-up questions that the journalists might not answer. Additionally, the researchers do not know exactly who provides the answers. Face-to-face interviewing seems to provide more certainty in avoiding some of these issues (Iordanidou et al., 2020). However, journalists might not want to admit to self-censoring to an interviewer as it is not an accepted practice, everywhere.

A few studies use a mixed-methods approach (Morris, 2017; Rožukalne, 2020); however, even in those cases, there are limitations. The first limitation is to balance qualitative and quantitative data when presenting results; the second is the data compatibility and suitability – whether the quantitative and qualitative methods and data support each other.

Hence, several studies show the presence of self-censorship and indicate its causes and implications. However, very few of them contribute to methodological approaches to detecting any subtypes of private self-censorship. Our research raises the issues about what kinds of methods are most suitable for studying self-censorship and what are the additional failings of these methods. This study aims to empirically analyze and frame the potential detection mechanisms of unperceived self-censorship (USC) of journalists by describing one more subtype of self-censorship and contributing to the overall methodological observation of the phenomenon. Based on the findings, we argue that both public and private instances of self-censorship may have subtypes, with USC describing one potential type. More specifically, this study sheds light on USC, which may be left unnoticed under the conventional auditing of newsroom practices. We conceptualize the USC term with empirical findings and discuss the occurrence of USC in the context of broader implications.

For a clearer understanding of this study's scope and contextual position, we take the liberty to explain the Estonian and Eastern European contexts in a self-censorship discussion.

SELF-CENSORSHIP IN ESTONIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

Although this study was conducted among Estonian journalists and incorporated international data only as a reference indicator, the findings are significant and generalizable to other countries with similar socio-cultural backgrounds. The study by Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020) shows that self-censorship in Central

and Eastern Europe (CEE) is just as severely affected by economic constraints, oligarchic influences and new authoritarianism as they are by their Communist pasts. According to Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020), this becomes particularly intense when a media system faces rising populism and authoritarianism, paired with oligarch-dominated ownership. Rožukalne (2020) conducted a mixed-method study on Latvian journalists and finds that while journalists consider themselves responsible for contributing to their media organization's commercial interests, media companies merge the existing editorial values with collaboration, adaptation and business thinking. This finding resonates with the notion that commercial interests function as pressure mechanisms that condition self-censorship (Balčytienė & Lauk, 2005), and journalists may not consider editorial restrictions in the newsroom self-censoring (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2017; Tapsell, 2012). Lauk & Hoyer (2008) studied censorship in Estonia and Norway during the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and argue there are more differences than similarities in how journalists and media systems react to censorship and liberation from it. Therefore, while similar historic trajectories enable scholars to compare the current and the past, especially in the CEE countries, any that differ in context must always be considered.

Estonia is a Post-Soviet Eastern European country with a media market serving a population of 1.3 million habitants. Drawing from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model of media systems, Estonia's can be described as belonging to the Nordic democratic corporatist model. Most countries using this model also belong to the *media-supportive, more consensual* cluster (Humprecht et al., 2020), which demonstrates high resilience to online disinformation and, for this reason, have not been significantly affected by the effects of information disorder. This is relevant because Estonia, like Poland, Hungary and other Eastern European countries, has experienced increasing pressure from populist political forces and digital hostility despite rising to fourth position in the global ranking of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). During the pandemic, political pressures intensified as several politicians cultivated their political capital, similar to the neighboring Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania (Aljas et al., 2022).

The year 2020 was an exceptionally challenging year for Estonian journalists – besides the COVID-19 pandemic, the right-populist government repeatedly attacked journalism. The 50th government cabinet of Estonia was in office from April 29, 2019 to January 14, 2021. It was a centre-right coalition of the *Centre Party*, right-wing populist *Estonian Conservative People's Party* (EKRE) and the conservative party *Isamaa*. During this coalition, on several occasions, the politicians threatened to censor certain journalists and reduce funding for Estonian Public Broadcasting because of critical coverage of EKRE and the ministers (Donauskaitė et al., 2020). A penal code amendment that allowed courts to ban journalists from covering court cases entered into force and was actively used

by judges in 2020. Right-populist government ministers refused to provide information to journalists at press conferences without giving any valid reason. All this culminated in Estonia dropping down three positions in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2021).

Furthermore, 2020 was also when the international project *Journalistic Role Performance* (JRP) of journalistic cultures collected data for the second wave across 365 news media outlets in 37 countries, including Estonia. The project is based on Claudia Mellado's (2015) operational model of six journalistic roles. The JRP project compares journalistic role performance in news texts (N=148,474) and role perception expressed in surveys or interviews with journalists (N=2615). The project aims to analyze how the performance of journalistic roles varies across societies. The data focuses on journalistic role performance and role perception and embraces content analysis of Estonian news texts (N=2409) and a survey among journalists (N=99). The survey gives a relatively representative insight into the Estonian journalists' community as the labor market comprises approximately 900 active journalists. We conducted a preliminary analysis of the survey data on journalistic autonomy and censorship variables. The results indicated a somewhat unusual discrepancy between journalists' answers in all JRP countries and Estonia.

The JRP project survey data showed that 26% of Estonian journalists and 23% of all journalists in JRP countries use self-censorship practices at work (Figure 1), which indicates that the self-censorship level in Estonia is somewhat like other countries. The project data also showed that Estonian journalists have greater liberty to develop a story idea or cover a topic with 92% of the Estonian respondents expressing they have this liberty always or often compared to the 71% for all JRP countries. This indicates a significant difference between Estonia and other JRP countries showing that journalists perceive more freedom in selecting the stories for covering. Compared to other JRP countries, Estonian journalists perceive they have somewhat more freedom to select the news-stories they work on (76% and 87%, respectively). Regarding verbal and physical attacks from external individuals, 79% of Estonian journalists tend to feel safer than the 70% of JRP journalists.

Figure 1. Characteristics of journalistic autonomy and censorship.
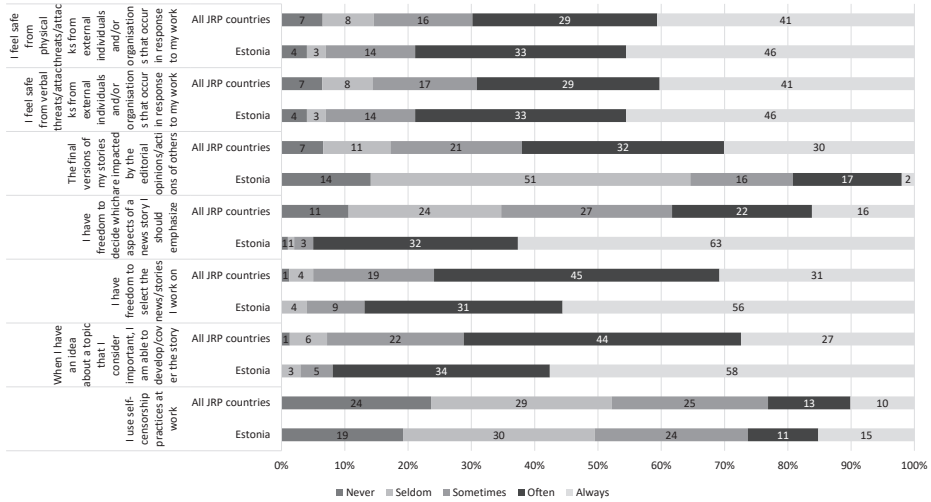
Source: Authors / Journalistic Role Performance Project

Overall, this data enables us to conclude that Estonian journalists perceive a higher level of press freedom and safety than journalists in all other JRP countries. From that, it would be natural to deduce that the level of self-censorship of Estonian journalists would be lower. However, the results indicate a somewhat similar level of self-censorship than in other JRP countries. This urges us to seek an explanation of the finding. We contextualize the issue in the events in 2020 and juxtapose this with the role performance of journalists in the news collected at the same time and complete it with semi-structured interviews with journalists.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The roots of self-censorship exist in the spiral of silence in which an individual promotes self-preservation by limiting the expression of political opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Hence, the foundations of media self-censorship are much more universally applicable to individuals rather than tight professional conduct. Contextualizing self-censorship in journalism, Herbert Gans' (1979) conceptualization approaches the phenomenon from external pressure factors (political, ideological and commercial). Gans (1979) notes that self-censorship is not always a conscious decision and may appear in several practices, e.g., framing a story. The invisibility of self-censorship makes it exceptionally difficult to study, but Gans's (1979) conceptualization enables us to incorporate these three pressure factors to delimit the scope of actions that could indicate self-censorship.

Cook and Heilmann (2010) propose a five-element model which diversifies the dimensions in which self-censorship may occur. Their model consists of elements such as (1) a suitable fit between a conception of permissible expressive attitudes and those attitudes actually expressed; (2) the content of the conception of permissible expressive attitudes; (3) the enforcement of the fit according to the conception of permissible expressive attitudes; (4) the censor and censored; and (5) their interaction. The model elements do not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for censorship to exist (Cook & Heilmann, 2010, p. 4).

Drawing from the theoretical foundations of self-censorship, we set one of our research focuses on the public criticism of journalism that set the scene in 2020. Although politicians' negative critical comments on journalists and journalism may be interpreted as verbal attacks, we refer to this sort of text as media critique. This enables us to incorporate media texts that are also constructively critical of journalism. The first research question concerns the content analysis of media texts criticizing journalists and journalism negatively: *RQ1: What patterns of media critique characteristics emerged over 2020 in media texts criticizing journalism?*

Studying self-censorship is tightly related to factors influencing news work and journalistic role performance in the broader sense. Hanitzsch et al. (2010) analyzed six dimensions of hierarchical categories where organizational, professional, and procedural influences were perceived as more powerful limits to journalists' work than political and economic influences. These categories are valuable indicators of what aspects to consider when analyzing self-censorship. These results can be incorporated with another journalism culture study, the JRP project (Mellado 2015). The common ground between the six dimensions (Hanitzsch et al. 2010) and the six domains (Mellado 2015) are in the interventionism, the watchdog, and the loyal-facilitator roles.

From this knowledge, we derived the research focus that bridges the media critique and juxtaposes it with journalistic role performance. The second research question aligns journalistic role performance in news with media critical texts of 2020 to see changes and potential mutual influences: *RQ2: How did the occurrence of media critique juxtapose with journalistic role performance in 2020 news texts?*

The third research question exploits the aforementioned Cook and Heilmann's (2010) five-element model and seeks a qualitative explanation of the self-censorship of journalists with the purpose to bridge the quantitative and qualitative findings and to fill the gap by outlining the nature of self-censorship: *RQ3: How do journalists implicitly and explicitly express self-censorship in describing their work situations?*

METHODOLOGY

We use various samples and datasets to combine quantitative content analysis of media texts, a survey and semi-structured interviews with journalists. The following gives an overview of the samples according to the methods that support answering the research questions.

MEDIA CRITICAL TEXTS

The articles of media critique were collected from the web archives of *Estonian Public Broadcaster*'s news portal ERR.ee, Delfi.ee and Postimees.ee. These three are the most significant media organizations comprising over 80% of the Estonian media market. We used web archives because they also incorporate newspapers (*Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees*), television and radio content (ETV and *Kanal 2*). We used the search terms "journalism", "journalist", "media", "media critique", "freedom of speech", and "censorship" to collect data articles. Only articles regarding Estonian journalism were included. All the articles were then read, and the texts that did not directly relate to media criticism were excluded. This enabled us to extract 156 texts, including opinions, news and feature articles. In the revision process, we also outlined the categories for topical categorization.

The texts were then coded, using variables that detected 1) genre of the text, 2) mentioning of an attack or 3) criticism towards journalist or journalism, 4) recommendations for change in journalistic conduct, 5) mentioning of censorship or (limiting) freedom of speech and 6) occurrence of call for regulating censorship (both warning and promoting it). These variables were developed stemming from the purposes of this study, aiming to provide an overview of the tendencies in media criticism in 2020. As the aim of the content analysis of media critical articles was to supplement the sample of news texts in the JRP sample, the content analysis uses mainly descriptive analysis. This enabled us to get an overview of general tendencies in media critique and content that was not covered in the role performance sample and variables.

ROLE PERFORMANCE IN THE NEWS

Using the constructed week method, a stratified-systematic sample of two weeks was selected for each media outlet in each of 37 JRP projects' partner countries from January 2 to December 31, 2020. The Estonian data was collected by analyzing news content from 11 media outlets covering all four mediums and all national media organizations. Altogether, 2409 news items were coded on the *Socisurvey* platform provided by the JRP Project.

The unit of analysis was the news item. We relied on the operationalization proposed by Mellado (2015) to measure professional roles in news content. The coding manual included operational definitions of the performance of the

watchdog, interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic roles based on the relationship between journalism and the de facto power, the presence of the journalistic voice in the story, and the way the journalists address the audience. Each of these roles-dimensions was characterized by various measures of professional practices, reporting styles, and narrative schemes. An aggregate of indicators (N=22) measured the three performance roles: interventionist (n=5), watchdog (n=9), loyal-facilitator (n=8).

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

We carried out 17 semi-structured interviews with reporters working in converged newsrooms. We used purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling. We selected the journalists based on our previous knowledge of them having public experiences with attacks, insults and hostile comments. After having conducted a couple of interviews, journalists approached us, recommending interviewees with similar experiences to our sample. Altogether, the sample consisted of 10 female and 7 male journalists aged 23 to 46 years. Their work experience varied from 2 to 20+ years and most (13 of 17) had gained experience in multiple newsrooms, not just the one they worked for at the time of the interview. Regarding the theme of the news beat that the journalists covered, our sample is rather diverse because our interviewees seldom had one particular thematic beat to cover. In addition to covering the general news beat, some also wrote or edited opinion articles and advertisements, and some occasionally contributed to the work of the investigative newsroom.

The interviews were carried out from June to December 2021; the prolonged period was caused by the Covid pandemic, with both respondents and researchers battling with the virus. Interviews were carried out by three researchers who followed the same research questions and interview guide. We conducted the interviews face-to-face or using video conversation apps like Skype and Teams. Although there were differences in data gathering (online communication vs. face-to-face) and subtle differences in how the interview plan was followed, the data is comparable as they were systemized by the principal researcher, who worked closely with the other two.

By the time we had finished collecting the data, 4 of the initial 17 journalists had left the field. The interviewees were from all types and sizes of media organizations, but to protect the journalists from potential attacks, we do not distinguish them in more detail that would enable any recognition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The characteristics of media critique were thematically divided into five categories. The categories *covering attack* and *covering criticism* embraced either directly attacking or criticizing or mentioning an attack or critique related to either a journalist or journalism. Both categories mentioned above apply to both negative and constructive contexts. We based this notional split on the comprehension that a general attack or criticism on journalism may be more straightforward for the journalist to cope with, whereas the personal naming of a journalist or media outlet could be interpreted as more severe and hurtful. Although we did not include contextual data that would have shown us the potential event that evoked the criticism, it is possible to say that the onset of the stories was diverse. To bring out just few examples, the articles stem from attacks of politicians provoking conflict, journalism's role in the COVID-19 crisis, the defense of anonymous sources and courts limiting journalistic coverages. Hence, it cannot be generalized that the media critiques were drawn from any particular type of current affairs events.

The analysis shows that journalists were personally referred to in 7% of all articles (Figure 2). In 15% of the texts, the journalist's name or media outlet was mentioned. More than half of the articles that covered attacks mentioned the outlet's name or targeted journalism in general. Therefore, the frequency of the severest attacks on journalists personally in media critique texts was relatively rare, and most media critique covering attacks on journalism was rather general. While this finding emphasizes that journalists may not be personally attacked in public texts criticizing media, it does show that the objects of journalistic attacks are diverse and aimed at undermining journalism as an institution.

In the texts that covered media criticism, 12% mentioned a particular journalist's name, and 22% mentioned the outlet's name. The majority (57%) of media critique articles focus on the criticism made on any media outlet or journalism in general. Similar to covering attacks, the coverages of media critiques target the journalistic institution rather than an individual journalist. As constructive criticism is related to making a recommendation for a solution, we also analyzed if the media critical texts recommend one. Almost two thirds (74%) of the articles in our sample did suggest a solution. This finding shows that media critical texts – may they be negative or constructive – have the purpose of suggesting a change. The changes may, for example, be a call for news media to be more diverse or be more balanced in coverage. Both recommendations depend on the potential interest and aim of the recommender and how journalists interpret the advice. The journalists or newsrooms may interpret the call for changes or recommendations as interventions, and therefore the critique may start to function as a pressure mechanism for public or private self-censorship.

As censorship, in general, was frequently stressed by politicians in their public statements, we were interested in finding out how this is expressed in media critique. It must be disclosed that in the preliminary reading of the sample, we struggled with differentiating mentions of censorship and self-censorship in the texts because the texts often used the term censorship in an evidently wrong manner or meaning or talked about (self)censorship although not explicitly using the term. Therefore, we interpreted both explicit and contextual mentioning of censorship or self-censorship as the presence of a reference to censorship. An aggregate of 76% of the media critical texts mentioned censorship, and 33% included a call for (self)censorship. This finding indicates that censorship discourse dominates most media critical texts. While the terms self-censorship and censorship may be wrongly used and overused in the wrong contexts, they may put public pressure on journalism and journalists.

Figure 2. Occurrence of characteristics of media critique in media critical texts of 2020.
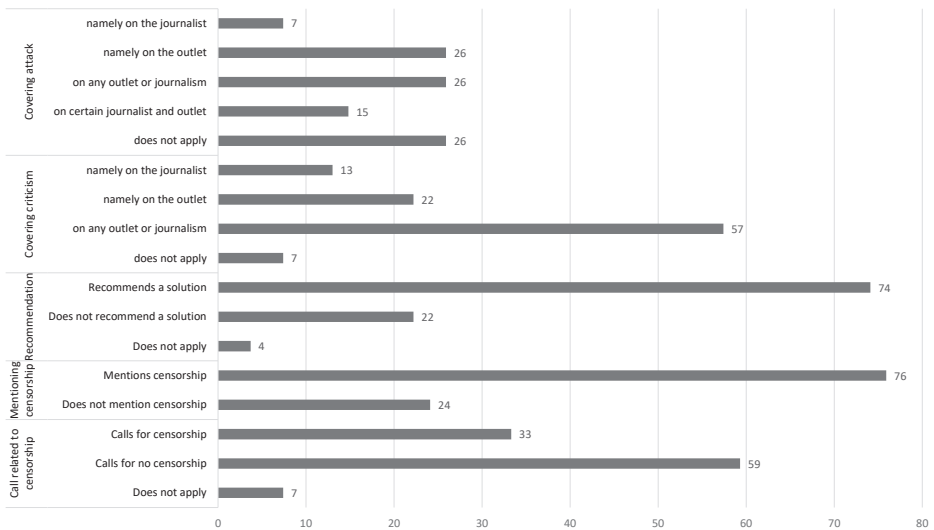
Source: Authors

While censorship is related to institutional power and ideological impact on journalism, it is often assumed that the media critique, especially on calling for (self)censorship, comes from politicians. Our analysis showed that in 52% of the media critical texts, the author of the opinion or the primary source of the critique was a journalist or media manager. Politicians were the main sources or authors of 15% of the articles. Therefore, the media critique in our sample was led by the discussions proposed within the profession.

Because we aimed to get a descriptive overview of the media critical texts in 2020, the sample is small and does not enable a significant analysis of relations between variables. However, it does give us general indications of the themes

that dominated media critique in 2020 and potentially influenced journalists' perception of self-censorship.

JUXTAPOSING MEDIA CRITIQUE AND JOURNALISTIC ROLE PERFORMANCE

The performance of journalistic roles that express power relations (watchdog and loyal facilitator) indicate the journalists' distance from politics and governance and show the fulfilling of the critical monitoring of power. The interventionist role shows the presence of a journalistic voice but is relevant also for self-criticism of the profession, hence related to discussions over (self)censorship. Based on the content analysis of the JRP data set on Estonian news articles (N=2409) we were able to show the change in the presence of these roles in the news (Figure 3).

It must be recalled that at the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Tallinn on February 27. On March 13, the Estonian government declared a state of emergency. Therefore, the changes in role performance were also influenced by the social factors related to the pandemic. Previous analysis has shown a negative correlation between the occurrence of watchdog and interventionist roles and the number of COVID-19 cases (Männilaan, 2021).

The analysis of media criticism texts and their correlation to the performance of journalistic roles shows that before the active phase of the pandemic in March 2020, the number of articles criticizing journalism was higher than in other months (Figure 3). Simultaneously, the occurrence of the watchdog role in news texts decreased in April and May. In August, the right-populist coalition party EKRE declared that they would not answer any questions from *Delfi*, one of the three most significant new media organizations. This statement and the actual boycott by EKRE's politicians triggered discussions over the forced censorship of journalism. This sequence of events explains the slight increase in the occurrence of the watchdog role and media critical texts in the news from August till October. However, November and December were exceptionally modest in all three journalistic roles of this analysis, as well as media criticism. This may have been conditioned by the sharp escalation of the pandemic that overshadowed the profession-related discussions.

As the watchdog role opposes that of the loyal facilitator, the low occurrence of it in the news is in accordance with the contextual profile of Estonian media – relatively high freedom and distance from governmental power. Nevertheless, we highlight the increase in the presence of the loyal facilitator role in July, when the news texts seemed to contain more of this than the watchdog role. This may be explained by the usual low news season of summer months when both investigative and political analysis journalists take a summer vacation. However, while this may explain the low representation of the watchdog role, it does not clarify the sudden rise of that of the loyal facilitator. Hallin et al. (2022) analyze

the same JRP data and are able to show that the occurrence of loyal facilitator role increased in ten countries, especially in COVID-19 stories and this finding was independent from the level of press freedom or other societal factors. Hence, the shifts in power related roles are partly explainable by COVID-19 conditions. On the other hand, the combination of factors (e.g. pressure from media critique, political tensions, pandemic crisis) may explain the changes in role performance. This suggests more thought is needed on how combining these factors in the long term may influence the role performance, perception and practice of self-censorship.

Figure 3. Journalistic roles and media critique.
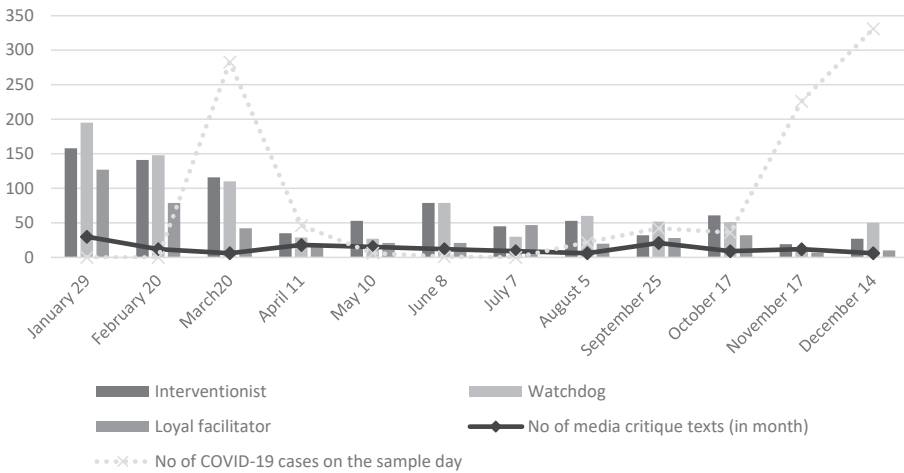
Source: Authors / Journalistic Role Performance Project

Our analysis showed no explainable alignment between the occurrence of the interventionist role and media criticism. The performance of the interventionist role was relevant for our study because it shows the journalistic voice in the news. The interventionist role consists of indicators that may explain the content but may also serve the journalist's aim for advocacy or expressing their views and opinions. The latter may be the basis for accusing journalists of being prejudiced or biased. However, it is also a significant indicator of news organizations' trust in their journalists to give them freedom and autonomy to express their viewpoints.

Although the number of media critique articles is too small to show any correlation, it shows a theme that also contextualizes the journalistic role performance. While the limitations mean this study is unable to conclude that media critical texts directly or solely influenced journalistic role performance or self-censorship practices, it may exemplify one potential cause that contributes to the pressures leading to unperceived self-censorship. By contrast, while

media critical texts may be a factor pressuring self-censorship practices, they function in combination with several other topical impact factors (e.g., health crises, conflicts, political disturbances) and should be observed consistently for an extended period.

PERCEIVED AND UNPERCEIVED SELF-CENSORSHIP

We differentiate between experiences with self-censorship, the ones that journalists explicitly state and the ones journalists do not label as self-censorship (the phenomenon we label unperceived self-censorship, USC), but which have signs of self-censorship according to the theoretical framework.

Self-censorship came up in the interviews when journalists talked about how they manage stress caused by attacks toward them or negative experiences with sources and audience members. Therefore, journalists described self-censorship as a preventive strategy to keep them safe from harmful stress. Journalists stated explicitly they had directed themselves away from newsworthy topics that are connected to past negative experiences, which could come at three levels. First, from the sources; secondly, from audience members (as a reaction to a polarizing topic – e.g., trolling – and thirdly, from a combination of both sources and audience members. Interviewees felt that attacks from both audience members and sources were a relatively new trend. There were several occasions when an influencer with alternative views had encouraged their followers to attack the journalist on social media or in the comment section of the news outlet. Therefore, journalists admitted to being more careful when covering topics such as dangerous criminals, alternative medicine representatives, and influencers.

The following quote from a female journalist illustrates cases where the managing editor had encouraged self-censorship, especially when sources or audience members (or both) were possibly attacking the journalist. Although the idea for discarding the news coverage came from a manager, the journalist started doubting herself after the idea was brought up and adapted. It also shows the lack of organizational measures and responsibility for keeping the journalist safe from digital hostility.

> The managing editor said that maybe it is a good idea to leave the topic and source aside for my mental well-being. They said I might not be able to handle the hate. They might have been right… [Female 2]

The lack of protection in the newsroom against such attacks was also revealed by a journalist, who said that self-censorship was usually an individual strategy of journalists for protecting themselves because no one else would do it. A similar strategy became evident in a previous study that included female journalists (Ivask, 2020).

Attacks and insults, and not being protected had led journalists to become disappointed in the media organization, which again encouraged journalists to lower their journalistic standards as the job was not worth it. Interviewees said that they no longer covered as many conflicts as they used to, and consequently they occasionally focused more on softer and entertaining topics.

> I do not get paid enough for getting insulted and attacked all of the time, and the organization is doing nothing./.../ I feel that no matter what I say or do, I will get insulted and attacked, I have learned from this to say less and less... [Female 4]

Journalists were not only avoiding the topics and sources because they might receive a lot of hateful and insulting reactions but also because they could have received threats. Interviewees described incidents where their family members had been approached and threatened. Also, there had been incidents where journalists were threatened by using their personal information (children's names, photos, spouse's name, etc.).

> I am hiding all personal information on the internet. There are no connections to relatives, to my spouse. Everything is hidden, so they could not be included in the attacks. [Male 3]

> The worst attacks have been when someone threatens my family, my children. There have been sleepless nights. [Female 3]

> They have used photos of me and my spouse when attacking me... I do not know where they got those photos from. My accounts are closed to outsiders. [Female 4]

An earlier study conducted in Estonia's newsrooms found that journalists did not have the time or professional support for analyzing neglected newsworthy topics (Sommer, 2021). Our analysis showed that there were newsworthy topics that journalists discarded without any explanation. It leads to the topic of unperceived self-censorship among journalists in our study. In some cases, journalists described "being extra careful when choosing and carrying on with a topic" [Male 2; Female 3] because they were unsure if they were ready to deal with the negative consequences. Furthermore, if journalists were not prepared to face the consequences, they chose not to cover the topic or assessed very carefully how to frame and present it. They also expressed the possibility of putting the topic aside and waiting until they were psychologically ready to deal with the consequences and then either do the coverage or hand it over to a colleague. One

journalist described how negative experiences had made him more precautious in covering some topics (e.g., stories concerning populist parties [as they were able to mobilize people for attacking the journalist], alternative medicine and conspiracies), with whom they had had negative experiences. Some interviewees expressed rethinking coverage on already chosen topics. This finding substantially contradicts the JRP survey finding, according to which 65% of Estonian journalists expressed that the final versions of their stories are seldom or never impacted by the editorial opinions/actions of other newsroom members (Figure 1).

The discrepancy between the results of the survey and the interviews becomes even more evident, as 97% of Estonian journalists expressed always having or often having the freedom to select the stories they work on. The interviews enabled us to conclude that the assessment of self-censorship may be impacted on by the professional image and pride in in the press freedom ranking, yet the descriptions of practices indicate unperceived self-censorship. Journalists said that on professional grounds, it was helpful to be doubtful as it made them more precise in their work and protected them from potential libel cases:

> But maybe it is a good thing that I am unsure about the reporting? It makes me check and go back over every little detail. [Male 1]

However, factual reporting did not protect them from litigation, as the interviewees described situations where sources or opponents would sue journalists – for covering prohibited topics – with the aim of causing stress and putting pressure on the journalist and damaging the media organization. Additionally, using and protecting anonymous sources was expressed to be under threat, causing the abandonment of topics of public interest. Litigation is a form of intimidation not only in Estonia but also globally (Borg-Barthet et al. 2021). Actions like litigation, public attacks and causing stress to induce abandonment and avoidance of specific topics are external pressure factors that indicate the potential causes for self-censorship, but it can be detected only by studying these activities. Otherwise, the journalists may not explicitly express the implications of these actions as self-censorship.

Interestingly, after some time, some journalists who avoided using the term *self-censorship* mentioned that what they describe *might be self-censorship*. Their discussions led to them recognizing that they did not previously see the described situations and actions as self-censorship. For them, censorship was too solid and dramatic and felt exaggerated. Estonian journalists often compared themselves and suppressed colleagues in authoritarian countries who are known to be censored by governmental institutions. This contextual comparison led the interviewees away from admitting to self-censoring or that something or someone had such an impact on them. The journalists who did not see their

practices as self-censorship also tended to normalize attacks and being "thick skinned". This finding should be interpreted in the context of Estonia being a Post-Soviet country. The Soviet press system was completely replaced by the liberal and market-oriented media system (Lauk & Hoyer 2008). Nevertheless, the journalists' social and cultural practices may have created professional attitudes to rigidly avoiding the acceptance and perception of censorship in any form. Drawing from Lauk and Hoyer (2008) and combining this with our results, we argue that the rejection of censorship is one potential explanation to have conditioned blindness to self-censorship, leading to USC.

CONCLUSIONS

This study observed and detected the existence of unperceived self-censorship (USC) among Estonian journalists. We argue that both public and private instances of self-censorship have subtypes, of which USC can be interpreted as a subtype of private self-censorship conditioned by several factors, This subtype may remain unnoticed while auditing the newsroom's (self)censorship practices with conventional methods (e.g., surveys). However, USC becomes explicit through nuanced observations of actions and situations that journalists experience and describe, but which they do not perceive as self-censorship because for several reasons, the main one being that to journalists, "self-censorship" is a somewhat an alien term. Also, considering any form of the term censor goes against the professional standards and norms of journalism, would make respondents careful to admit it practicing 'self-censorship'.

While the literature has interpreted public attacks on journalists as a potential pressure factor conditioning self-censorship (Fadnes et al., 2020; Walulya & Nassanga, 2020), our results conclude that public media criticism may set the scene for the overall impression of journalism being under censorship pressure. While public attacks on individual journalists are rare in the media critical texts, private personal attacks are more frequent but also more disclosed and may thrust journalists toward self-censorship since journalists do not perceive the cause-and-effect relationship between these acts and private self-censorship. One solution to prevent the escalation of private self-censorship would be to systematically observe and recognize these attacks on an organizational level and support journalists in dealing with these pressure situations.

Although the media critical texts often explicitly use work censorship or implicitly refer to it, the term is frequently misused. Due to the Soviet past, censorship and self-censorship carry strong cultural and social connotations (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2017; Lauk & Hoyer, 2008), ethical sensitivity (Bucholtz, 2020) as well as commercial intentions (Balčytienė & Lauk, 2005; Rožukalne, 2020),

which make the use of the terms a veritable taboo. Therefore, the USC should always be studied, taking into account the country's specifics and media system (e.g. history, the performance of journalistic roles and journalistic culture).

This study has its limitations. The sample of media critical texts is small because of the miniscule size of the Estonian media market. While the small sample does limit any rigorous analysis, it opens opportunities for comparative research in other countries. Collecting more samples across media environments and extending the sample for a longer period would give a more nuanced insight into the factors conditioning USC.

While the categorizations of self-censorship are more diverse than discussed in the literature or the current study, there are avenues for further research. Our results indicated not only the existence of unperceived self-censorship, but the empirical material also revealed the potential presence of perceived hidden self-censorship. By this, we mean self-censorship acts that journalists make but do not express to the researcher or their peers. As this form of self-censorship emerged only as asides during the interviews, we could not delve into it more deeply. However, future research with creative and novel methodologies could make significant discoveries on hidden self-censorship.

As censorship is closely related to journalists' work-related security and well-being, the unperceived self-censorship could be further explored in these contexts. How do security and well-being influence self-censorship? We believe there is a niche for a comparative study on the matter.

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