

Chapter 7

Inequality in the media and the “Maslow pyramid” of journalistic needs in Central and Eastern Europe

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This chapter investigates how self-regulation could counter inequality of access to the media as a channel for information and expression in the context of the former state-socialist countries. It describes the Anglo-American self-regulatory model that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe attempted to adopt after the political transformations in 1989-1991, observes the failure of the implementation of this model and – through a case study of Hungary – describes some of the dysfunctions of the news media in the region. Further, it suggests that ethical journalism is the highest level of the “Maslow pyramid” of journalistic needs, preceded by acceptable work conditions, job security, a functional market and media freedom, and hence that ethical journalism cannot be pursued as long as the other conditions are not met. More particularly, it argues that the reasons for the failure of the self-regulatory mechanisms in these new democracies to be efficient concern the distortion of the media markets and the deficit of media freedom, among other factors.

Media regulation is aimed at ensuring media freedom and pluralism by providing equal access for all to the media which function as a forum for both expression and information. It is based on positive intervention such as the creation of public service media, the licensing of community radio stations and the establishment of press subsidy systems, as well as on negative intervention, such as ownership regulation preventing mergers that undermine the pluralism of voices (see Bayer’s chapter in this volume). Academics and policy makers have widely discussed the role of *regulation by the state* (e.g. Alonso & de Moragas Spà, 2008; Just & Puppis, 2012; McQuail & Siune, 1998). However, they have paid much less attention in recent decades to the role that *self-regulation by the journalist community* may play in ensuring equal access to the media: the topic of this chapter.¹

The role of the journalist community in improving the equality of access to the media is almost self-evident. Professional journalists have *communicative power* in

1. Recent decades have witnessed an increasing trend of *co-regulation*, that is, when the form is set by the state but the content is chiefly defined by the journalist community and, in some cases, representatives of the audiences (cf. Frost, 2000). This chapter, however, will not discuss co-regulatory efforts, which have occurred fairly sporadically in most of Central/Eastern Europe.

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the sense that they have the means and the expertise to access the media and to give voice to their views. That audiences have traditionally lacked these means constitutes *structural inequality* between journalists and audiences. Self-regulatory mechanisms – including codes of ethics and practice, ethics commissions, press ombudspersons, journalism training and prizes promoting quality journalism – are based on the acknowledgment of this inequality and the ensuing *social responsibility* of the press. For example, the Hutchins Commission in the United States argued in 1947 that the press should provide “a representative picture of the constituent groups in society” (quoted in Siebert et al., 1956/1963: 91), and the Royal Commission on the Press in the United Kingdom suggested in 1949 that “the press as a whole [should give] an opportunity for all points of view to be effectively presented” (quoted in Curran & Seaton, 1998: 288).

This is an ethically based obligation. As William Ernest Hocking, a member of the Hutchins Commission, explained: “If one claims free expression as a right, he claims it for others as well as himself, and he binds himself to respect their exercise of it; if he yields his claim, he weakens the claim of others” (Hocking, 1947, quoted in Siebert et al., 1956/1963: 96). Equality of access to the media and freedom of expression are closely related concepts, as communication rights pertain to all citizens, regardless of their social status, expertise and means of accessing media. In a similar vein, freedom of expression and freedom of information are closely related, too; for one to be able to form and to voice opinions, one needs to be reasonably well informed (see McQuail’s chapter in this volume).

Historically, the social responsibility theory of the press emerged as a response to the libertarian theory: the latter criticized the former for restricting access to the media to the wealthy and the powerful and called for equality of access for all (Siebert et al., 1956/1963). In terms of journalism ethics, the social responsibility approach is more of a normative theory than an actual practice in that only selected outlets – such as some public service broadcasters and leading broadsheets – followed it, while other media either continued to promote particular values and interests or remained focused on entertainment.

The social responsibility theory of the press and the ensuing self-regulatory mechanisms aimed at ensuring fair and neutral reporting first emerged in the US and the UK in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Chalaby, 1996). It should be remembered, though, that journalism in the United States has historically oscillated between partisanship and the search for objectivity, the former being the rule in times of crisis and war and the latter in periods of prosperity and peace (Bajomi-Lázár, 2003). Newspapers in the United Kingdom have always been more partisan than broadcasters, the latter, bound by law, seeking to cover news and current affairs more neutrally (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Importantly, self-regulation is not a magic weapon. In and by itself, it cannot ensure complete equality of access to the media. Only if coupled with an adequate regulatory and business environment can it be expected to enhance quality journalism. Media freedom, including the autonomy of journalists, is another pre-condition for self-

regulation to be operational: only journalists who are their own masters can follow their own rules (Frost, 2000). In recent years, the efficiency of self-regulatory efforts has also been undermined by the rise of civic journalism, lacking consensual norms and evincing some controversial phenomena, such as the massive production of fake news.

During and after the fall of state-socialist regimes and the ensuing demise of direct political control over the press in the late 1980s and early 1990s, journalism communities in Central and Eastern Europe experienced an unprecedented amount of media freedom; the old political elites were no longer and the new ones were not yet powerful enough to seek control over them. This freshly earned autonomy enabled journalists to adopt self-regulatory mechanisms, an option that had been blocked for many decades. Because of the global dominance of satellite television channels such as CNN International and BBC World in the news market, as well as newly opened access to the services of neutrally reporting Western European and North American wireless agencies, Western media seemed to constitute *one single model* from the perspective of Central and Eastern European media professionals. Differences within the Western world, which only came to be highlighted by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini's 2004 book *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*, were largely unknown at the time among journalists in the former state-socialist countries. Media models other than the one that Hallin and Mancini called the “North-Atlantic” or “liberal” system – such as the polarized pluralist model in Southern Europe where advocacy journalism prevails – had little impact, if any, on journalism communities in the former state-socialist countries, despite the obvious similarities between the third-wave democracies that had emerged in the mid-1970s and the early 1990s (cf. Bajomi-Lázár, 2017a).

In short, the self-regulatory efforts in Central and Eastern Europe were largely based on the Anglo-American (or North Atlantic or liberal) model and were often assisted by BBC experts; for example, the Visegrad Notes, adopted in 2000, were drafted with the involvement of journalists from the British public service broadcaster. Such media ethics is rooted in the social responsibility theory of the press in that it suggests that the media have a *social mandate*, that is, they serve society at large rather than particular political and business interests (cf. Kunczik, 2001). They are meant to harmonize diverging communication interests such as the public's right to know and privacy rights (Frost, 2000). It is notable, though, that there are some minor differences in the self-regulatory methods adopted in the former state-socialist countries; for example, Lithuania – because of its cultural and geographic proximity to Scandinavia – adopted the Swedish model of press ombudspersons, which remained largely unknown in most other Central/Eastern European countries.

The major standards commonly promoted by the Anglo-American codes of ethics include truthfulness, accuracy and impartiality, non-discrimination, the protection of human rights and the respect for privacy, the presumption of innocence, the protection of sources and conflict of interest rules. Such codes describe consensual rules that distinguish good journalism from bad journalism (Schulz, 2001) and thus enhance

the legitimacy of the journalistic profession with the public. These rules also protect journalists when exposed to political pressures in that they can argue that they have followed legitimate rules, such as rules on the protection of sources (Frost, 2000). Briefly, media ethics is meant to improve the fairness of the media and to secure the informed political choices of citizens by levelling the inequality of access to the channels of mass communication and by ensuring the pluralism of information. Media ethics is a means of morally driven self-restraint in that it warns journalists not to abuse their communicative power and designates the legitimate limits of free speech for them.

Importantly, however, it is not only moral considerations that drive the journalist community when adopting self-regulatory mechanisms. In a competitive media market, media ethics is also enhanced by business-mindedness. By improving the transparency and legitimacy of the rules of the profession, self-regulation is meant to restore public trust – the major capital of journalists – in the media in the event that it has been undermined by excessive tabloidization or political pressures (Frost, 2000). Historically, journalistic self-regulation emerged in the United States as an effort by broadsheets to distinguish themselves from the yellow press (Iggers, 1988). In addition, as Svennik Høyer (1998: 58) observes, the rise of the objectivity doctrine meant the decline of the party press in the US, making neutrality a new business model and a “strategy for larger circulation and larger audiences”. Ethical journalism is hence also expected (albeit not proven) to improve newspapers’ position in the audience and advertising markets and thus to generate profit.

This chapter describes the failure of self-regulatory efforts and some of the dysfunctions of the news media in the former state-socialist countries. It suggests that ethical journalism is the highest level of the “Maslow pyramid” of journalistic needs, preceded by acceptable work conditions, job security, a functional market and media freedom. Hence, ethical journalism cannot be pursued as long as the other conditions are not met. More particularly, it argues that the reasons for the failure of the self-regulatory mechanisms in these new democracies to be efficient concern the distortion of the media markets and the deficit of media freedom, among other issues.²

Self-regulatory efforts in Central and Eastern Europe

Despite repeated efforts, such as the adoption of codes of ethics and the establishment of ethics commissions, politically neutral journalism has never taken deep roots in Central and Eastern Europe; it has been the exception rather than the rule (Lauk, 2009). In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, its failure has been “reflected in a lack of impartiality” and “a relatively high degree of mobility between the professions of journalist and politician” (Školokay, 2001: 129, 116). In Hungary, “the *one-party* model of the press has not disappeared completely but has been transformed into a

2. Special thanks are due to Auksė Balčytienė, Attila Bátorfy, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Josef Trappel for their valuable comments on the first drafts of this chapter.

multi-party model that is still far away from the *nonpartisan* model of the press” (Lázár, 1992; emphases in the original). In Poland, the Media Charter of Ethics prescribes the standards of objectivity, but most journalists have continued to “represent partisan politician viewpoints” (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012: 41-43). In Moldova and Romania, there has been a “discrepancy between professional ideology and real journalistic practice” (Milewski et al., 2014: 108). In the three Baltic states, the media system has “not yet been fully separated from the existing political system” (Balčytienė, 2012: 62).

At the same time, differences prevail across the former state-socialist countries; for example, neutrality-seeking journalism has taken deeper roots in Poland than in Romania and Moldova (Milewski et al., 2014). It follows that the ethics of social responsibility journalism are respected or ignored to different degrees across the region, and the countries evince different patterns of breaches of ethical journalism. As a summary study by Ellen Hume (2011) shows, recurring breaches of journalism ethics in Central and Eastern Europe include fake blackmailing photos (the Czech Republic), intense tabloidization (Romania), national and ethnic discrimination (Latvia), over-politicization (Poland and Romania), the bribing of advertising agencies for advertisements (Romania) and desk-top journalism excessively relying on official sources and other news outlets (Romania). Some breaches of journalism ethics are even more dramatic. Henrik Örnebring (2012: 506) highlights that news media in Central and Eastern Europe widely engage in advertorial and kompromat practices:

Advertorials are a form of media content oriented toward promotion and positive content, whereas kompromat (a Russian word but widely understood in the entire CEE region) refers to a form of media content oriented toward smearing and negativity. Both forms of content are [...] either paid for or ordered by political or business interests, but [...] appear like regular news content.

The breaches above, maybe needless to say, also occur in some of the more established democracies of Western Europe and Northern America (cf. McNair, 1998; Schudson, 2003). A major difference, however, is that, once uncovered, breaches of journalism ethics in the Western world are usually followed by moral, political and, sometimes, legal sanctions. An illustrative case in point is the aftermath of the phone-hacking scandal in the United Kingdom in the 2000s, including an investigation by the Press Complaints Commission and the closure of News International’s *News of the World*. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, mistakes are rarely admitted, and breaches of journalism ethics usually do not trigger consequences.

Media ethics ignored: The case of Hungary

The case of Hungary is particularly illustrative of the breaches of media ethics in Central and Eastern Europe – not because Hungary is so typical of the region but rather because it evinces a collection of some of the “worst practices” of journalism.

While the Code of Ethics issued by the Hungarian Journalists Association (2011), the largest journalism organization, stresses standards such as integrity, independence, reliability and fairness, as well as the protection of human rights, non-discrimination, the respect for personal dignity and the protection of information sources, a paper by Tamás Terestyéni, published in 1999, suggests that standards of ethical journalism were repeatedly violated in the first decade after the political transformation. Breaches included outright lying, selective reporting, mutual accusations lacking rational arguments, poor transparency of public information, intrusions of privacy, the failure to admit the mistakes made, the rejection of responsibility, the disguising of problems and a lack of self-reflection and of self-criticism, which resulted in an overall “weakness of the public sphere”. To this, Ildikó Kaposi and Éva Vajda (2001) add the predominance of official sources and the ensuing failure of journalists to contextualize information, the frequent breaches of conflict of interest rules and the abundance of quantity journalism as opposed to quality journalism, brought about by the widespread practice of freelance journalism paid by the number of pages submitted.

In the 2000s, further deficiencies included pure speculation (as opposed to factual reporting), the insinuation of politicians without proof (of corruption), fake re-contextualization (for example, the selective quoting of sentences from public speeches to attribute to them a new meaning that was at odds with the originally intended one), hoaxes (with reference to non-existent or non-verifiable sources), strange timing (such as the disclosure of old corruption scandals at election times) and disproportionately loud criticism (such as a major outcry after a minor transgression of the political norms) (Bajomi-Lázár, 2010).

The electoral victory of the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance in 2010 marked the beginning of a new era, starting with the immediate adoption of new media regulation and the establishment of a new media authority consisting of Fidesz delegates only. In subsequent years, the Hungarian media landscape was fundamentally transformed as a new media policy aimed at the *particularistic redistribution* of media resources (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017b) was gradually implemented, resulting in the massive rise of pro-government outlets, including public service broadcasters and the national wireless agency, and the marginalization of critical voices, especially in rural areas (Urbán et al., 2017). According to an analysis published by the independent investigative news site Átlátszó, in 2017, 59 per cent of all media outlets held a pro-government position, 20 per cent were neutral and 21 per cent were oppositional to and/or critical of the government. These ratios varied across sectors. Of all the nationwide daily titles, 65 per cent supported the government, a ratio reaching 90.5 per cent in the market of weeklies and 100 per cent in the market of regional dailies. Oppositional/critical voices had preserved a good position in two sectors only: that of online news sites (50%) and that of evening television news bulletins (45%) (Bátorfy, 2017a). These figures worsened after the repeated electoral victory of the incumbent parties in 2018, immediately followed by the closure of three critical outlets: the broadsheet *Magyar Nemzet*, the talk station Chain Bridge Radio and the English-language

news site BudapestBeacon. A little later, in June 2018, the weekly *Heti Válasz* also ceased print publication.

The media transformation was mainly conducted via the excessive redistribution of state sources to pro-government outlets: while in 2008 state advertising amounted to only 3 per cent of the total advertising revenues, it reached 26 per cent in 2017 (as opposed to an EU average of 7%) (Bátorfy, 2017b). State advertising in various outlets allows the government to exert pressure on editorial content. For example, the ratio of government-sponsored ads in the last left-wing quality daily standing, *Népszava*, reached 56 per cent of the newspaper's total revenues in 2017 (Dercsényi, 2017).

As a result of the transformation of the media landscape, a series of questionable new media practices emerged in the 2010s, further undermining the equality of access to the media and creating a hegemony of pro-government voices. These included:

1. Extensive pro-government propaganda campaigns in print, on radio and television as well as on online platforms. The campaigns are eased by government cronies buying media outlets with the help of loans provided by state-owned banks, the funding of partisan media from public advertising resources and the capture of public service broadcasters (on propaganda techniques in “public service” media, see Bajomi-Lázár & Tóth, 2013). State-funded political campaigns have also delivered propaganda messages on outdoor posters and via staged “national consultations”, that is, print surveys mailed to all households and including framed answer options. Such campaigns were aimed at the discrimination of entire social groups based on their nationality and ethnicity, particularly targeting immigrants from the Near East and North Africa (Zalán, 2017). Another publicly funded campaign targeted Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros, whom the Hungarian government accused of supporting immigration and thus threatening Hungarian and European Christian culture. In the year 2017, the government spent 12 billion forints (40 million euros) on this campaign, with most of the funding being channelled to pro-government outlets (Átlátszó, 2018).

2. Decreasing transparency of public interest information, including the massive classification of data. This is particularly true regarding the construction of a new nuclear power plant near the city of Paks in central Hungary and the obligation imposed on media outlets to pay for such data when contacting authorities. Journalists of critical outlets were repeatedly denied access to political events, including the opening ceremony of the parliament in May 2018. Government politicians have declined interview requests from critical media outlets on a systematic basis.

3. Character-killing campaigns launched on pro-government outlets against critical intellectuals and opposition politicians, often based on unverified information. Kompromat articles were typically unsigned, anonymity being a means of rejecting responsibility for the contents. A common feature of these moralizing campaigns was irrelevance: they frequently reported on personal issues that were not linked to the public activities of the people affected. Recent character-killing campaigns include

those against the journalists Boróka Parászka and Olga Kálmán, the stand-up artist András Nagy-Bandó and the politician Péter Juhász (as well as the humble author of this chapter).

4. The rise of “collaborative journalism”, that is, the uncritical interviewing of the senior representatives of the governing parties in pro-government media, including public service radio, the daily broadsheet *Magyar Idők* and regional newspapers.

5. Highly selective reporting of facts, especially regarding how immigrants have allegedly invaded Western Europe.

6. The production of fake news on an industrial scale (444, 2017; Corruption Research Center Budapest, 2018; International Press Institute, 2017). Hoaxes and disinformation campaigns have, of course, always existed; one might recall that the first law banning the dissemination of fake news was passed in the United Kingdom as early as 1275 (Briggs & Burke, 2010). The novelty is that this time fake information is released via multiple sources simultaneously.

7. The publication of a “black list” of citizens who are critical of the government. Given the historical tradition of blacklisting people with a different political view, this might exert an intimidating effect on those listed (and also on those who could not read their names on the list but were known critics of the government). For example, on 12 April 2018, the weekly *Figyelő* published the names of hundreds of intellectuals described as the “mercenaries” of George Soros (Figyelő, 2018). On 26 April, the daily *Magyar Idők* listed “left-liberal” writers and other artists (Szakács, 2018). Whether the people listed had made a decision to act as public intellectuals and to voice their views overtly or not, their blacklisting is a reason for concern – not only from an ethical but also from a legal perspective.

This, of course, does not mean that all newsrooms breach the standards of ethical journalism on a regular basis. It is, however, important to note that many of the breeches of journalism ethics described above appear to be intentional. As Gábor G. Fodor, editor-in-chief of the pro-government news site 888.hu, proudly said in an interview in April 2018, “We do politics. We are fighters. There is nothing to be ashamed about” (quoted in Czopf, 2018). This is a special kind of advocacy journalism, though, as the speaker associates himself with the governing parties, not just some political cause. His position might remind the observer of the state-socialist times when journalists were considered to be “the party’s soldiers”, an expression commonly attributed to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin himself.

The fact that this is not the Southern European kind of advocacy journalism but rather *downright propaganda* is illustrated by the personal, organizational and financial links between the governing party and the media owners. For example, the proprietor of Radio 1 and of TV2 is Andrew G. Vajna, the government commissioner in charge of the film industry, and most regional dailies are owned by Lőrinc Mészáros, the former

Fidesz mayor of the home village of Viktor Orbán. By contrast, the opposition parties are not formally linked to critical outlets.

The practices above are obviously at odds with journalism standards, such as truthfulness, accuracy and impartiality, the protection of human rights, non-discrimination, the respect for privacy, the presumption of innocence and conflict of interest rules. This is no surprise, as a key paradox of media ethics is that the media outlets that are the most in need of self-regulation are the most reluctant to exert self-restraint, while audiences tend to judge the overall performance of the media on the basis of the most poorly performing outlets. According to the *Digital news report 2017* issued by the Reuters Institute, among 36 countries on five continents, Hungary took the thirtieth position in terms of general trust in the media; only 31 per cent of people trust the media (the list is led by Finland, with an outstanding 61%). In Hungary, only 11 per cent said that the media were free from political pressures, which granted Hungary the second-last position among the sampled countries. Further, the difference between general trust in the media (31%) and trust in one's favourite outlet (54%) was the highest in Hungary. In other words, the media are the most polarized – or the most partisan – in Hungary among those 36 countries. Put differently, Hungary evinces the most detached journalism practices from the idealized standards of Anglo-Saxon journalism in the sample.

The practices described above are not meant to ensure equality of access to the media but to undermine it. Particularly worrying is the intentional distribution of fake news, aimed at the manipulation, not the information, of citizens. Unethical journalism has contributed to increased inequality of access to the media as a channel for information and expression and created an "uneven playing field" (Bozóki, 2017) for competing political actors.

As already noted, the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance won the legislative elections in the spring of 2018 for the third time in a row. The role that the media practices above have played in their massive electoral victory can only be a matter of speculation. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that the election results would have been different, had the media been free and critical, as, under the hegemony of pro-government voices, citizens were unable to make informed choices and were unaware of the suspected corruption cases involving government members and their cronies.

Partisanship persisting in Central/Eastern Europe

Why have the Anglo-American standards of journalism ethics failed to take roots in those Central and Eastern European countries in which journalist communities have made repeated efforts to implement them? The reasons, of course, may vary across countries, and different factors may be at play to varying degrees. Below is a tentative list of the factors that might explain the failure of the implementation of the standards of neutral journalism in many of the former state-socialist countries.

The Anglo-American standards of journalism are based on a common understanding of the public good; they are both rooted in and meant to reinforce this understanding. The standards for neutral reporting have evolved in societies that have had, comparatively speaking, moderately pluralist political cultures and in which the political landscapes have been dominated by centrist parties, such as the US and the UK (Chalaby, 1996; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Even though polarization has been on the rise in these countries, as shown by the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum, political and social actors in these societies, including journalists, seek consensus and try to avoid conflict as a main rule. By contrast, the societies of Central and Eastern Europe have, in historical terms, experienced frequent political changes (Hallin & Mancini, 2013), the only thing unchanged being *change*, and are societies in *permanent transition*. Furthermore, as Auksė Balčytienė, Epp Lauk and Michal Głowacki observe (2014: 10-11),

... a changing society is characterized by its lack of a solid social or ideological base [...] finding consensus on important public issues becomes increasingly problematic. [These] social trends significantly contribute to increasing political divergence and fragmentation and create a heterogeneous and socially polarized picture.

Most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe evince polarized pluralist or fragmented pluralist political cultures, as a number of important societal questions remain unresolved. From a historical perspective, these countries have experienced a long series of political transformations whereby competing political elites grabbed power, often through violent means. Hungary, for example, underwent ten different political regimes in the course of the twentieth century, the ideological profiles of which ranged from the far right to the far left (Szabó, 2000). The political landscapes of these countries are typically dominated by a number of political parties that are divided along major ideological cleavages. Consequently, conflict is more frequent than consensus. It follows that notions of the public good diverge and journalists are divided along ideological and political cleavages. They primarily associate themselves with a particular cause, ideology or party rather than with society at large. As competing concepts of the public interest prevail, journalism ethics based on a common understanding of the public good can hardly be implemented, if at all.

Another reason for the failed implementation of the Anglo-Saxon standards of journalism may concern the relatively low levels of media freedom. According to Freedom House historical data, media freedom has been declining since the European Union accessions in 2004 and 2007 in the overwhelming majority of the Central/Eastern European countries. Worst of all of the former state-socialist countries where the media have to date been described as only “partly free” are Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and some countries in the Western Balkans (Freedom House, 2017). The decline of media freedom was particularly spectacular in Hungary, which – according to the press freedom rankings compiled by Reporters Without Borders (2018) – ranked twenty-third among the globe’s countries in 2010 and seventy-first in 2017. In Central and Eastern Europe, many of the legacy media are either subject to direct political control,

as is the case for most public service broadcasters and national wireless agencies, or subdued by indirect political control via government cronies or “oligarchs” (Štětka, 2012). As already noted, media freedom, including the autonomy of the journalism community, is a pre-condition for self-regulatory mechanisms to be operational and enforceable. As long as this freedom is lacking, journalists are bound to follow the rules prescribed by their masters.

Last but not least, the distortions of the media market may also be responsible for the inefficiency of self-regulatory mechanisms. As noted, media ethics is also driven by business-mindedness: in a competitive market, quality journalism, providing the public with fairly presented truthful and plural information, is widely believed to be profitable. However, in a distorted media market – such as that of Hungary, where the government has become the single most important player, distributing advertising revenues on a favouritist basis – it is not journalistic performance but political loyalty that matters the most. In fact, quality journalism in markets like this is often sanctioned by punitive government measures, such as the withdrawal of broadcasting licenses and the denial of state advertising revenues. At the same time, unethical journalism practices, such as character killing, are rewarded. As a result, in markets distorted by politically motivated and excessive state intervention, unethical journalism has become a viable business model. Without a financial drive, self-regulatory mechanisms will lack efficiency and only few outlets will attempt to follow them.

Conclusions

No one particular element of a complex media system can be transplanted into another with a wholly different political, cultural and economic background. This is one of the likely reasons for the failure of the adoption of the Anglo-American self-regulatory mechanisms – designed to level inequalities of access to the media as a forum for information and expression – in many of the former state-socialist countries where the political and business settings differ from those in the North Atlantic countries. While the mechanisms enhancing ethical journalism may be efficient in some of the moderately pluralist old democracies that exhibit free media as well as free and competitive media markets (such as the US and the UK), they are unlikely to succeed in polarized pluralist young democracies where media freedom has been undermined and the media market has been distorted by particularistic media policies. Where politics is conflict-based and regulation by the state is excessive and intentionally poorly designed or implemented, the necessary conditions for efficient self-regulation will be lacking. In such contexts, the lack of efficient self-regulatory mechanisms means that the media will perpetuate and sustain inequalities, rather than countering them.

Many journalists and newsrooms in Central and Eastern Europe encounter more common problems than media ethics and have simply struggled for survival to date. In the “Maslow pyramid” of journalistic needs, ethical behaviour is the highest level,

preceded by job security, acceptable work conditions, a functioning market and media freedom. Under political pressures and excessive state intervention, these basic conditions are hardly met for critical-minded journalists. Ethical journalism is part of one's self-assertion, which few journalists can presently afford (see Figure 1). In other words, journalism ethics cannot be pursued properly until all of the other conditions are satisfied.

Figure 1. The Maslow pyramid of journalism



Does this imply that, in view of the current political and economic circumstances, the idea of ethical journalism should be abandoned altogether in many of the former state-socialist countries? This may not be the case. While the implementation of the standards of journalism ethics is certainly lacking, the knowledge and dissemination of such standards provides both journalists and the public with a normative framework that helps them to assess and evaluate the actual practices of journalism.

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