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SCHOLARSHIP

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THE PLACE OF THE SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA, 2001.

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The place of the subject in contemporary journalistic ethics is discussed in the context of a waning of “classical journalism” and a proclamation of the end of journalism – all at a time when it is difficult to define the boundaries between journalism and non-journalism and to predict the future of journalism. Trends in the development of journalism suggest an identity crisis of journalism. There are four aspects which are particularly important: the increasing amount of infotainment and tabloid journalism, the issue of media scandals and false investigative reporting, the interweaving of marketing and journalism, and the question of the future of journalism in cyberspace.

The research of identity crisis is connected with the question of professionalisation. It appears that the key elements of the profession, especially autonomy and ethics, are in crisis. The argument in this dissertation is that the crisis of journalism is, above all, the crisis of the subject, of a journalist and an addressee as subjects. In “classical journalism,” a journalist takes the place of the (professionally competent) source in the communication process: he is a subject and is supposed to have control over the fundamental processes in media reality. The concept of “classical journalism” is defined on the basis of its public function: journalism is a social activity carried out for the common welfare. A journalist has a central position and plays a key role in all phases of communication process: gathering, selection and framing of information regarding facts and opinions.

But the practice of journalistic discourse differs from this model. The “market-driven journalism” is becoming predominant, and it is mostly incompatible with ethics. The prevailing motivation is not offering information to the public in order to produce well-informed and critical citizens. Instead, journalism is guided by economic considerations, directed at gaining profit. The news is a commodity, which must be sold to the consumer. A journalist loses his place as a subject. His role is taken over by those who possess the economic power and/or political authority (e.g., corporations, advertisers, politicians, and public relations services) and they control the communication processes. The “classical journalism” presupposes a community of addressees who are defined by their status of citizens as owners of communication rights. A journalist is primarily responsible to them, to the public.

The addressee of market-driven journalism is not a citizen: a communicator communicates to the mass consumers and potential voters. The audience is the object of his monologue, and it has a value for him only as a means to achieve goals set by economic and political actors. The crisis of journalism is also the crisis of an addressee as a subject, as an autonomous and responsible person. The basic con-

cept of our discussion is the subject. The subject of the modern era (Descartes, Kant) is sovereign, absolute, and represents the principle of “one reason – one truth – one objectivity.” The question of the individual morality and its universal foundation is in the limelight of the modern ethical thought. The transition to the postmodern era is marked by the end of absolute rationality, the end of metaphysics, and the end of the subject. Structuralism downgrades the subject from a transcendental foundation to an empirical construction. The crisis of reason and the crisis of subject appear as the ethical crisis of postmodernity: pluralism, relativism, postmodern ethos, tolerance, and moral uncertainty have been brought forward.

Ethical norms are replaced by the postmodern ethical relativism. The ideology of autonomous journalist, based on the Enlightenment concept of truth, universal reason, and freedom, has failed. The crisis of journalistic ethics is, above all, the crisis of journalist as a moral agent. The subject is disappearing, as is the journalist’s main instrument – a question: a journalist is not a subject and he is not asking journalistic questions. There is no question, no answer, and no responsibility. The postmodern turning point also asserts the recognition of social (media) construction of reality: there is not a single and absolute Truth, no objectivity, no foundation, and no ethics. The absolute is absent, and everything becomes acceptable. Journalistic values depend on the spontaneous momentary interpretations. The relativistic, pragmatist, and Machiavellian approaches to journalism have been advanced. The mass media give priority to the type of journalism, which is successful at selling attractively constructed images, and a human being serves only as a means to achieve economic and political goals of the actual communicators. The crisis of the subject is the crisis of a human being as a person.

In this dissertation a personalised attitude is proposed, based on Lévinas’s concept of responsibility, as a possible solution. A postmodern journalist should try to overcome the crisis by striving for personal relationships as a way to the personality fulfilment. A personal ethical relationship enables the realisation of a human being – not as a modern ontological subject, but as an ethical subject. According to Lévinas, a personal relationship is an asymmetrical one, as the self is more responsible than the other. The ethical “I” is subjectivity in so far as it “kneels” before the other. As soon as I acknowledge that it is I who is responsible, I accept that my freedom is anteceded by an obligation to the other. A postmodern journalist should be constituted by his relationship towards the other as a person. The other – primarily an addressee – is superior to a journalist, and is his “teacher:” a journalist’s identity is to be found in a sight of an addressee as an owner of communication rights. A journalist has an infinite and unconditional ethical responsibility for him. While he is answering to his face, he is being born into a journalist, he is becoming an ethical subject. A communitarian approach to journalism (journalism as conversation, public journalism) is attempting to realise these ideals in practice: the primary role of journalism should be stimulating public dialogue on issues of common public concern. These findings lead to the conclusion that the professionalisation of journalism should be understood above all in terms of an infinite responsibility of a journalist as the ethical subject, and therefore as a never-ending process.

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JOURNALISTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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In this dissertation aspects of journalism are described based on slightly more than a thousand interviews with journalists in The Netherlands. The main research objectives were: (1) to describe and explain the basic, occupational and professional characteristics of journalists in The Netherlands; (2) to compare findings with similar research projects among journalists in Germany, Great Britain, Australia and the United States; and (3) to explore the various ways in which contemporary developments in society in terms of multiculturalism, infotainment and the Internet are affecting journalists' core values and occupational ideology. In this abstract the differences and particularities of Dutch journalists arising from the international comparison of journalism survey data are presented.

The project is located in a long tradition of (inter-) national journalism survey research, which has developed parallel to a process of professionalisation in the journalistic profession. That process can be characterised by a gradual, consensual adoption and routinisation of certain norms, values and goals by professional members of the (mainstream) news media. What can be considered to be "Dutch" about Dutch journalists? A number of differences between countries stand out, which help to address this issue in detail: age, education, newsroom organisation, audience orientation, and media roles.

Dutch journalists are on average between four to ten years "older" than their colleagues in Great Britain, Germany, Australia, and the United States. This probably has to do with a particular feature of the Dutch media landscape: a relatively late introduction of commercial news broadcasts, and the stability (especially in terms of subscription rate) of the national and regional newspaper market. Findings suggest that especially newspaper reporters seldom switch employers, while online journalists – the "newest newspeople" – tend to move on to another newsroom every twelve months or so. The somewhat inverted age pyramid may provide near-future opportunities for younger and minority peoples to enter the profession – as indeed the data suggest that among less experienced journalists (and journalism students) more women and ethnic minorities are represented.

Dutch journalists share with their American (and to lesser extent their German) colleagues a high standard of formal education. The predominance of on-the-job training can perhaps be seen as typical of the Anglo-Saxon tradition in journalism education shared in Great Britain and Australia. This suggests that formal journalism education plays an important role in diversifying the (attitudes and views of the) population of journalists in a given national setting. Journalism education is sometimes accused of its potential "homogenising" effect on (the attitudes and views of) reporters and editors; these findings suggest that such an accusation must be modified.

In terms of occupational characteristics Dutch journalists think of themselves as all-rounders, mentioning a vast array of job descriptions, titles and functions in the newsroom. The experiences in other countries suggest that this may be a continental (North-) European phenomenon, as Anglo-American newsrooms are centrally organised with a high division of labour as compared to the somewhat holistic approach of for example Dutch and German media companies.

One result in terms of audience orientation stands out for Dutch journalists: they do not seem to interact much with members of their audience (with the exception of regional reporters), and rate feedback from their colleagues and superiors higher. Several previous studies regarding Dutch journalists' images of their audience suggest that one can indeed speak of a highly ambivalent relationship: on the one hand, the audience is important to the work of journalists, but on the other hand journalists do not feel inclined to actively pursue communication with their publics. This attitude can be ascribed to the relatively stable and "secure" media market in The Netherlands, where people have been working on average between 15 and 20 years in journalism, not threatened in their position by a steady influx of new (younger, higher educated) colleagues or (massive) shifts in the "loyalties" of publics. On the other hand, it is the most "static" group of journalists – reporters working at regional dailies – who say they rate their regular discussions with members of their audience most important. These journalists tend to live in the communities they serve.

Dutch journalists are more explicit in their support for an analytical, explanatory role for the media in society than their colleagues elsewhere. It is questionable whether this is typically Dutch, as several contemporary studies suggest that the news has become more interpretative throughout the twentieth century. What is interesting, though, is that Dutch journalists say it is much more important to follow the public sector (including business and government) critically than to, for example, investigate government claims or give people a chance to express their criticisms. In other words, journalists in The Netherlands have internalised the right to criticise government and business rather than serving as a filter, investigator, and platform of (criticisms of) the public sphere. Dutch journalists are indeed much more vocal in their wish to have an actual influence on politics and the public agenda.

This project has revealed that *journalists* in (Western) democracies share some key values (e.g., objectivity, ethics, immediacy) and characteristics (upper middle class, male, white, educated), and at the same time have developed different *journalisms*, in particular when it comes to the application of these values. This seems to be a paradox: journalism throughout the (Western) world is based on a more or less similar consensual occupational ideology – yet at the same time the set of ideal-typical values of this ideology vary in their respective meanings and functions in different sections and domains in contemporary journalism. Indeed, these values can be seen as interdependent on individual characteristics such as age, education, and relationship with (members of) an audience. In conclusion, it is fair to say that journalists in The Netherlands may not always be typically Dutch, but they are always typically journalists.