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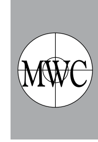

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Conceptualizing journalistic self-censorship in post-conflict societies: A qualitative perspective on the journalistic perception of news production in Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia

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Abstract

Post-conflict societies are subject to other societal forces than non-conflict or conflict societies. As a result, news production might differ between these three societal forms. In conflict, news is influenced either by the affiliation with a conflict party or at gunpoint. In non-conflict, it is shaped by manifold influences that are mostly connected to journalistic routines. In addition, post-conflict news production can be characterized by a high relevance of the conflict context and an emerging importance of routines. This article analyzes how journalists perceive self-censorship as an influence on post-conflict news production. It conceptualizes self-censorship as an analytic category and introduces different forms of self-censorship. Finally, the authors demonstrate the relevance of self-censorship as a force in post-conflict news production with the help of qualitative interviews conducted with journalists in Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia.

Keywords

news production, post-conflict, qualitative research, self-censorship, Western Balkans

Introduction

In one of the author's fieldtrips to Kosovo, a journalist stated that she had a brilliant story to report on the wrongdoings of foreign embassies in Pristina.[1] However, she did not

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write an article on that matter despite having all the necessary information from a range of credible sources. In a conversation, the journalist revealed that she had decided to withhold the story since it might have damaged the process of visa liberalization for Kosovo. Additionally, due to the involvement of high-ranking Kosovar politicians, she also stated that the publication of the story might have had a negative consequence for her personally, such as harassment or threats. This anecdote demonstrates that journalists sometimes hold back a story despite its obviously existing public interest or news value.

The decision to withdraw a complete story or parts of a story can be referred to as self-censorship (Cook and Heilmann, 2013). As already demonstrated above, this concept must be thought of as multi-causal since it appears to be rooted in quite different phenomena such as fear of physical harm or social responsibility. Analyses of self-censorship can be situated within scholarly work on influences on journalistic news production and have its roots in research on development news and newsroom ethnographies (e.g. Altheide, 1976; Bourgault, 1993; Breed, 1955; Martin, 1983; Skjerdal, 2008; Soloski, 1989; Warner, 1971).

Here, the main focus lies on the journalistic perception of the role that self-censorship plays in news production. Since it is an internal process that not necessarily correlates with a 'real-world-phenomenon' (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014), this article focuses on what Hanitzsch et al. (2010: 5) called 'perceived influences' on journalistic work. Consequently, the applied methodology of email interviews emphasizes the interviewees' perspective and perception of experiences with self-censorship. In this way, this article aims to achieve a deeper understanding of internal subjective processes that might have an impact on news production.

In addition, self-censorship appears to be especially relevant for news production in a post-conflict environment. While news production in a conflict society is shaped either by an affiliation with one of the conflict parties or direct physical threats (Bennett et al., 2007; GFMD, 2015), news production in a non-conflict situation is subject to a broad variety of different influences – for example, individual preferences or media routines that can be situated at various levels of analysis, such as a societal, organizational and individual level (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Journalistic news production in a post-conflict status, however, seems to be especially open to processes of self-censorship. This is firstly due to the enduring relevance of the conflict context (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014). Not all personal beliefs, opinions and stereotypes disappear after a conflict ends. Therefore, deeply rooted feelings of patriotism or affiliation with an ethnic group might still shape post-conflict reporting and thus affect news decisions. As a result, insights that potentially damage the positive image of parts of society may not be published. Secondly, self-censorship might be connected to the often present state of democratic and economic transition that follows a violent conflict (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007; Golcevski et al., 2013; Stremlau, 2013). Post-conflict societies emerging from a civil war often lack democratic civil societies. Journalists need to be trained – mostly while relying on some sort of international support – and journalistic routines and traditions need to be established over time. As a result, journalists might not be sure about what they can and should publish. Additionally, the economic consequences of the past conflict might still be present. Therefore, post-conflict societies need to recover from economical damage. Unfortunately, many post-war societies suffer from higher

rates of corruption and nepotism and are therefore often open to self-censorship of some kind (Breuning and Ishiyama, 2007). Finally, democratic transition in post-conflict societies often relies on the old pre-war elites (Bratic, 2008; Howard, 2002) and therefore on a few powerful individuals who might use their power to create a system of self-censorship.

To be able to capture the notion of self-censorship conceptually, this article will first try to define the status of post-conflict before differentiating between conflict, non-conflict and post-conflict news production. Thereafter, self-censorship will be situated within the research on influences on news production and different forms of self-censorship will be introduced. Afterwards, we will discuss the legitimacy of different forms of the withdrawal of information. In the brief empirical analysis, we will demonstrate the usefulness of our conceptual differentiation with the help of qualitative interviews that have been conducted in three post-conflict countries: Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. In these post-conflict societies, the formally institutionalized ethics is challenging. The codes of conduct, although established mainly by international interventions of organizations such as the OSCE and EU, are very weakly practiced. The last review done by the European Parliament of the ethical and legal media framework in the Western Balkans in 2014 found that even 'journalistic self-regulatory organizations, and especially journalistic unions, are very weak or even functionally non-existent' (p. 10). Similarly, the Codes of Ethics for journalists are not rigorously implemented and the employment rights of journalists are not properly defended.

What is post-conflict?

Defining the societal status of post-conflict is a challenging task. Whereas one can easily think of nations that are either in a conflict status or in a non-conflict or peace status, nations in transition between the two are in a somewhat fragile state. They can fall back into the chaos of violent clashes or continue on a (more or less) long road to peace. The issue of defining post-conflict is even more complex due to the rising number of intra-state conflicts. In their typology of post-conflict environments, Brown et al. (2011: 4) state:

> In big international wars, a formal surrender, a negotiated cessation of hostilities, and/or peace talks followed by a peace treaty mark possible 'ends' to conflicts. But in the sort of intra-state wars that we are chiefly concerned with it is not so simple. Hostilities do not normally end abruptly, after which there is complete peace. There may be an agreed 'peace' but fighting often continues at a low level or sporadically and frequently resumes after a short period.

In order to be able to grasp conceptually the status of post-conflict, the authors thereby suggest a process-oriented approach that can be described with the help of milestones on the road to peace. In this way, post-conflict nations should be seen rather as on 'a transition continuum (in which they sometimes move backwards)' (p. 4), rather than switching from conflict to peace status from one day to the other. To closer map the progress of this process, the authors suggest a range of milestones such as economic recovery, the end of violence, signing of peace treaties, demobilization, disarmament or the (re)establishment

of a state. While the idea of a procedural definition of post-conflict seems striking, the composed list of factors might not be complete and should be open to future research. Still, the relevance of post-conflict status as a research category remains due to the societal differences between post-conflict, conflict and non-conflict statuses.

Describing and defining post-conflict in the Western Balkans involves three most representative countries that went through different changes and transitions yet had similar situations and backgrounds. All of them are going through a transitional period which still reflects on the ways that news comes into being.

Kosovo has emerged from war and its state-owned and clandestine media of the 1990s have been transformed into Western style pluralistic media. Journalism has its nominal guarantees in the Constitution and has societal support. However, journalists continue to face political pressure and intimidation. Currently there are seven daily newspapers in Kosovo and the number of licensed broadcasters in Kosovo is 167, with 21 TV stations and 83 radio stations (Kosovo Independent Media Commission [KIMC], 2013). Kosovo has had two major scandalous media wrongdoings, namely the public naming of people who were suspected of being involved in war crimes (Hoxha, 2010) and the violence of March 2004 when ethnic reporting led to 19 people being killed and several thousand displaced (Andresen, 2009; Hoxha, 2010; International Crisis Group [ICG], 2004). These scandals generated major international criticism but also offered an opportunity for development.

Macedonia was involved in a civil and ethnic war in the early 2000s, and its society still remains fragile. Its media system has twice been transformed: from state-owned media in the early post-independence era to Macedonian language private media in the 1990s and, finally, to a pluralistic and multilingual form of media in the 2000s. Today, there are 7 dailies and 79 TV and radio stations. As a result, the Macedonian media market can be characterized as oversaturated. Macedonia still suffers from challenges of ethnic reporting, political crisis and a missing sentiment of national unity (IREX, 2015).

In terms of media distribution, Serbia remains the biggest regional power with 20 daily newspapers. Broadcasting in Serbia has transitioned from being state owned in pre-1999 to a pluralist and competitive market that is regulated by the state. However, there are still numerous illegal television stations, which are spread out over the country and do not (have to) follow any (ethical) rules (EJC, nd). The institutionalized media faced serious problems in 2014, when journalists 'faced numerous instances of pressure … after criticizing the government of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić' (Freedom House, 2015).

News production

Since the societal forms of conflict, post-conflict and non-conflict seem to differ, cultural processes within these societies might be subject to different influences as well. This article therefore analyzes journalistic news production as a cultural process in post-conflict societies.

In simple terms, news production is the process of creating news. Finding a procedural definition of news production, however, has proved to be a difficult task due to the large number of potential influences – for example, individual preferences or media

routines – that can be based on various levels of analysis, such as societal, organizational and individual (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Trying to define conflict news production narrows the definition of news production in space but, on the other hand, also 'deepens it in substance depending on the conflict context' (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014: 11). In this article's scope of conflict, news production is defined as a news production process that is shaped by conflict-related influences. Additionally, it is noteworthy that conflict news production and its underlying conflict influence each other. They synchronically co-exist by providing input to one another in the form of events to be covered or reactions to coverage, and thus enable the continuation of both the conflict itself and its reporting. Here, the coverage is often shaped by an affiliation with one of the conflict parties or predominant elite opinion (see Baker and O'Neal, 2001; Bennett et al., 2007). Additionally, oppositional or independent journalists have often been the victims of targeted killings, detention or threats (see GFMD, 2015).

Post-conflict news production, finally, is still influenced by the existing conflict context (see Golcevski et al., 2013). However, the routines and modes of journalism that are predominant in a non-conflict situation return gradually as the process toward non-conflict status continues. Also, as already mentioned, post-conflict societies are somewhat fragile constructs with an always possible fall back into violence. Additionally, the society's media and economic situation is still under the influence of the conflict (Brown et al., 2011). Thus, the past conflict still affects the reporting of events and might be re-escalated by news coverage, but general rules of journalism such as deadlines, profit expectations and newsroom conventions slowly regain some of the importance they potentially lost in times of conflict. Therefore, we assume that different forms of influences play a different role in the three types of societies.

News production in the Western Balkans was traditionally subject to state censorship until the late 1990s. With the fall of Yugoslavia, the opportunity for founding private media emerged along with the challenges of building a post-conflict society. The international community started working with journalists in various models of journalism in Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia almost simultaneously. However, challenges of structural as well as cultural constraints remain and journalists are predisposed to fit their news agenda to the surrounding environment on the basis of political and economic power holders.

Censorship and self-censorship as influences on journalistic news production

Influences on journalism have been subject to research for a long time with the notion of censorship as a form of economic or political constraint being an important part of it (see Bernhard and Dohle, 2014; Donsbach, 2000; Flegel and Chaffee, 1971; Hanitzsch et al., 2010; McQuail, 2000; Mizuno, 2011; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The phenomenon of self-censorship in news production, however, has not been exhaustively analyzed so far (Cook and Heilmann, 2013; Lee and Chan, 2009). It has its roots in research on development news – especially African news media – and newsroom ethnographies (e.g. Altheide, 1976; Bourgault, 1993; Breed, 1955; Martin, 1983; Skjerdal, 2008; Soloski,

1989; Warner, 1971). Self-censorship can be defined as the individual self-restriction of one's freedom of speech. Specifically, journalists realize that reporting something would do more harm (to themselves or to others) than good and therefore restrain from covering particular events. Following Cook and Heilmann (2013), the concept can be divided into two different forms: public and private self-censorship. Public self-censorship is an individual reaction to a publicly existing agent of censorship. Consequently, in regard to that existing censor, journalists internalize the rules of what they are allowed to cover and self-censor themselves accordingly. The conceptualization of private self-censorship sees the agent of censorship and the journalist that is censored as the very same person. 'Private self-censorship is an instance of an intrapersonal relationship within an agent between different standpoints they take towards their own attitudes' (Cook and Heilmann, 2013: 190). This means that journalists might censor themselves because of an assessment of different values such as professional (e.g. an important story) and ethical norms (e.g. a story that is important but might ruin someone's life).

There is an important difference between objective and perceived influences on news production (see Hanitzsch et al., 2010). The former empirically correlates with a 'real world phenomenon' – such as budget cuts – but might not be seen by journalists as having a major impact. The latter 'reside[s] solely in the perceptions of the individual journalist' (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014: 7) and their perception depends on the way objective influences are played out in news production. Consequently, objective influences can sometimes not be mapped adequately while conducting interviews since the interviewees might not be fully aware of them. The idea of self-censorship needs to be conceptualized as a perceived influence within news production. The decision to withhold a story does not necessarily reflect any real life occurrences. Rather it correlates with the journalists' interpretations and perceptions.

This can be demonstrated with the help of the spiral of silence. This theory is based on the idea that an individual's willingness to express an opinion partly depends on how he or she estimates public opinion on that matter. Consequently, one can conclude that journalists might self-censor an article if they think that public opinion – as they perceive it – is in strong disagreement with their expressed opinion or interpretation of an event. Thus, a journalist might want to avoid social isolation. However, perceived public opinion is not always identical with actual public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Scheufele and Moy, 2000). As a result, the decision to self-censor a story is not necessarily based on real occurrences but on the journalistic perception of them.

Therefore, in line with Hanitzsch et al.'s (2010) work on perceived influences on journalistic news production, one can conceptually differentiate six different origins of self-censorship in news production: professional, procedural, organizational, reference group-based, economic and political self-censorship. *Professional self-censorship* is a reaction to a story or parts of a story not being in line with professional policies, norms and conventions. The journalist, therefore, sees a conflict between publishing the story and 'what is commonly believed to be good and acceptable practice in journalism' (Hanitzsch et al., 2010: 15–16). *Procedural self-censorship* describes a decision based on operational consequences within news production. Resources – especially time, money and space – are restricted in journalism. As a result, a journalist might decide not to report on something since it might be too costly or be too close to a fast approaching

Table 1. A conceptualization of self-censorship based on origin and motivation.

	Public	Private
Professional	Story is not in line with an officially existing professional code of conduct, media laws, etc.	Story is not in line with personally held professional expectations/claims
Procedural	Story might need too much media resources, e.g. time, money, space	Story might need too much personal resources, e.g. private time, money
Organizational	Story is not in line with the opinion of the owner or supervisor	(Story could threaten personal career)
Reference group-based	Story is not in line with reference group's opinion	–
Economic	Story might harm the newspaper's financial situation, advertisers or general economy	Story might harm own economic situation
Political/ ideological	Story is not in line with (influential) person's political opinion/ideology; story might harm political processes	Story is not in line with own political opinion/ ideology

Note. The applied conceptualization uses archetypal categories: in particular, the economic and organizational dimensions are to some degree related to each other. The authors do not claim that this list is complete.

deadline. *Organizational self-censorship* refers to the withholding of information due to organizational processes and structures. This includes both the newsroom itself – with editors and supervisors – as well as the media organization's management level and ownership. An example of organizational self-censorship is the rejection of an article because it might not be in line with the supervisor's preferences. *Reference group-based self-censorship* is the decision not to pursue a story based on the assumption that friends, colleagues or the audience might not agree with the article's content. As already stated above, this idea can be conceptualized partly in line with the spiral of silence as described by Noelle-Neumann (1993). *Economic self-censorship* reflects the fact that news media are 'profit-oriented institutions that compete in markets' (Hanitzsch et al., 2010: 15). Therefore, a journalistic decision might be based on a media company's profit expectations, or advertisers' interests as well as the circulation figures or number of subscriptions. Finally, *political self-censorship* has its origins in a political context and can be described as the decision not to pursue a story due to political reasons. This can either be based on the fact that the article might not be in line with someone else's opinion (e.g. influential politicians) or if it is conflicting with one's personal opinion. While the former would be public political self-censorship, the latter is an example of private political self-censorship.

As outlined above, self-censorship can be either privately or publicly motivated and might have its origin in six different fields of influence. The resulting research matrix is displayed and illustrated with examples in Table 1. However, not all combinations appear to be relevant or even possible at first sight.

Finally, one can also differentiate different forms of self-censorship on the basis of who might be directly affected in the case of publishing a story. Here, one might think of

the journalist himself or herself (e.g. his or her health, economic or social situation), other individuals (like news sources or person who are reported upon) or a group of people (such as the general public or the whole news organization).

After these three forms of differentiating self-censorship – form, origin and affected person(s) – have been introduced, it would seem to be fruitful to examine the question of the legitimacy of self-censorship and ethics in journalism.

Legitimacy and ethics of self-censorship

As outlined above, censorship and self-censorship are connected to each other, but the latter exists in many different forms, each with its own motivational background. Therefore, while research often sees censorship as an illegitimate influence within news production, the question of legitimacy of self-censorship depends on the specific form and motivation behind it. Generally, research that analyzes influences on news (production) can often be interpreted as studies that analyze ethical situations. Following Hodges (1986: 35):

> Ethical situations are usually complex affairs in which a moral agent (the one making the ethical decision) commits an act (either verbal or nonverbal) within a specific context with a particular motive, directed at an individual or audience, usually with some consequence either positive or negative.

While in the case of censorship, the moral agent is either external to the newsroom, e.g. in the case of political censorship, or a supervisor within the newsroom, self-censorship sees the moral agent as the journalist himself/herself. As a result, the legitimacy of censorship can be related to the question of the independence of journalism from other social institutions, whereas the legitimacy of self-censorship also needs to consider media ethics. In doing so, it is possible to contrast censorship as a mostly illegitimate (except in the case of unethical journalistic practices) influence on freedom of speech from self-censorship that can either be legitimate or illegitimate.[2]

Media ethics, therefore, is a form of applied ethics and mostly focuses on 'the analysis and application of relevant ethical principles to the practice of news media' (Sidra and Badar Nadeem, 2014: 27). Thus, it focuses on the existing freedom and independence of the media system, on the one hand, and the responsible use of this freedom, on the other hand (Sidra and Badar Nadeem, 2014; Ward, 2011). As a result, self-censorship needs to be characterized as legitimate if publishing an information or running a story would be against media ethics in a way that it potentially damages others or if it disregards journalistic code of conducts. Therefore, a case by case judgement of the legitimacy of journalistic decision making is often necessary. Additionally, these judgements also need to reflect the global difference within journalism culture as 'the great challenge in media ethics at present is globalizing it. Media ethics historically has been mono-cultural, largely Western and male' (Christians, 2005: 3). Consequently, we will analyze the occurrence of self-censorship in the following, while leaving the discussion on its legitimacy to research on global journalism culture.

Empirical study

As demonstrated above, there is some evidence that self-censorship might be an important influence on journalistic news production in post-conflict societies. However, there is still (next to) no sophisticated research on this subject that analyzes journalists' perception of and their experience of the phenomenon (for exceptions, see Kenny and Gross, 2008; Simons, 2010). Consequently, our research aims at closing this gap and examines the occurrence and characteristics of self-censorship in post-conflict societies. Therefore, our main research questions are:

> *RQ1: How do journalists in a post-conflict society perceive and define self-censorship?*
>
> *RQ2: What are the characteristics of self-censorship in a post-conflict society (causes, affected issues and consequences)?*
>
> *RQ3: What forms of self-censorship did journalists working in a post-conflict society experience?*

By answering these questions, we aim to demonstrate the relevance of self-censorship within (post)-conflict research and the usefulness of the introduced conceptualization of different forms of self-censorship.

Methodology

While objective influences on the news can be identified using various methods such as experiments or content analysis, the most suitable approach for identifying perceived influences in journalistic news production are interviews (Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014). We thus conducted qualitative interviews in three post-conflict societies: Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. The potential interviewees were first contacted via email and asked to answer questions on their experiences as journalists. Conducting the interviews via email was a necessity due to the authors' inability to travel because of restricted time and resources.

This methodology, however, comes with serious limitations. First of all, the environment in which questions are answered is less controlled. It is not known who actually answered the questions and how focused the person was. Also, scholars only receive the written answers and cannot draw any additional conclusions based on visual or aural information. In addition, there is no control over the order in which the questions were addressed. Finally, the interviewees have no opportunity to ask if something in the questionnaire is unclear, also the researcher cannot ask follow-up questions (see Bryman, 2008; Gläser and Laudel, 2009).

On the other hand, email interviews offer interviewees the opportunity to respond at their convenience. Also, they can express themselves as comprehensively as they want to and are not bound to any time restrictions. This became visible in the partly very rich and elaborate answers we received. The methodology offers journalists the time and space needed to reflect on their own experiences. It even provides the opportunity to go back

to their answers after some time and add some more insights. This goes hand in hand with this study's focus on the journalistic experience of perceived influence in news production. Finally, since self-censorship is a sensitive issue, interviewees might feel more comfortable writing about it, which gives complete control over the information they give away.

As an alternative, the research could have been conducted based on face-to-face interviews. However, since there was no budget available, travelling to three countries and spending the needed amount of time to be able to meet with the necessary number of journalists was impossible. Also, due to the tight schedule journalists often hold, multiple trips to the region would have been necessary. Still, it is important to outline that face-to-face interviews deliver richer and more controlled insights than email interviews are able to. Another alternative approach could have been newsroom observations. However, since self-censorship appears to be an internal process, it remains unclear if the researcher is able to spot the occurrence of it. Also observations would have been restricted to less cases and it might not have been possible to investigate all three national contexts.

The list of potential interviewees was created by one of the authors who worked as a journalist in Kosovo. This initial sample was enlarged using snowballing. Here, we asked journalists who had already been interviewed to provide us with contact information of colleagues who might be willing to discuss their experiences in journalism. Gaining trust and explaining the purpose of this research have been crucial to the opening up of interviewees and ensuring that the answers provided during interviews will not affect their work or be connected to their names in any manner.

In total, we contacted 21 journalists of whom 14 replied. The questionnaire was in English and consisted of 11 open questions, two multiple-choice questions and professional backgrounds as well as socio-demographics. Within the questionnaire, we asked our interviewees about their general perspective on self-censorship, their personal experiences with it and their evaluation of different influences on news production in general. The questionnaire used for this study can be provided upon request. Interviews took place in two waves between October 2014 and August 2015. In the first wave, we interviewed five journalists from Kosovo, three from Serbia and two from Macedonia. The second wave was conducted to enrich the data and adjust the imbalance within the sample. Here we interviewed two journalists from Serbia and two from Macedonia. Generally, the results from both waves did not differ vastly, with the latter being a little bit more elaborate.

We interviewed journalists from public and private media as well as freelancers. Additionally, members within our sample worked for television, newspapers, radio and online media. A fraction of the media is also regional media, which has an audience from all three countries and is available in Bosnia and Croatia.

It is noteworthy that the order in which the results will be presented does not correspond to the order in which questions were posed in the questionnaire. This is mainly because the questionnaire started with some more general questions on influences on journalistic work and addressed the topic of self-censorship afterwards. We also tried to avoid the term 'self-censorship' by using phrases such as 'not covering an event even though it was worth publishing' or 'withdrawn, edited or rewritten a story because you

thought your colleagues would not like it to be covered'. In doing so, we only used the term 'self-censorship' once when we asked the journalists to define it.

Results

Our first research goal was to examine journalists' general perspective on self-censorship. Thus, the related research question is:

> *RQ1: How do journalists in a post-conflict society perceive and define self-censorship?*

Consequently, we started our interviews by asking journalists whether they had ever encountered a situation in which they had held back a story or part of it even though it was a piece worth publishing. Nine of our interviewees told us that they had decided to edit or erase a story despite an obvious public interest. The results show that the journalists in all three countries have been exposed to various forms of self-censorship.

When asked to define self-censorship, our interviewees provided two differing perspectives on the issue. The first definition can be summarized as self-censorship to prevent physical harm. Here self-censorship can be subsumed as the inability to run a story due to the fear of negative consequence and is a result of physical threats and the connected fear for oneself and/or one's family. Additionally, journalists are also afraid of negative consequences for their career. As a result, our sample described self-censorship as a situation in which 'you know the truth, but you can't say it' (Kosovar journalist, 34). Similarly, one respondent characterized self-censorship as the 'inability to speak your mind due to fear, unease or personal gain' (Serbian journalist, 31), thus as a lack of freedom of expression. Self-censorship can be regarded as a protection mode that journalists use to survive in a hostile post-conflict environment and thereby as a way of avoiding trouble in a sometimes unpleasant working place.

The second definition of self-censorship provided by our interviewees regards the concept as a form of protection either for their sources or even for the general public. Here, journalists decide to step away from a story since they are aware and certain that it will have an impact on a fragile situation or the life of their informants. Our interviewees described this form of self-censorship as imperative due to a journalist's network maintenance and trusting relationship to his or her sources and his or her responsibility toward society. Here, the journalists mostly mentioned situations in which they could not report something because it might have created a panic or threatened people's health. In that sense, as stated by a freelance journalist:

> The freedom of opinion and expression carries particular responsibilities in respecting the rights and reputation of other citizens and also, protection of national security and public order, health and moral. Therefore, sometimes the communication of information is subject to certain restrictions or censorship. (Macedonian journalist, 33, male)

Overall, our interviews revealed that a majority of journalists from all three research countries have faced situations in which they decided to censor themselves. There was

no recognizable pattern of nationality, form of employment or media outlet that seemed to create a more or less fertile soil for occurrences of self-censorship. This might either be a result of the low numbers of conducted interviews or of the general existence of a climate of self-censorship through all kinds of media outlets.

Our second research question asked for characteristics of self-censorship:

> *RQ2: What are the characteristics of self-censorship in a post-conflict society (causes, affected issues and consequences)?*

When asked for the *origins* of self-censorship, one motive is mentioned in nearly all interviews: fear. Journalists avoid some stories because they are afraid of their potential impact on theirs or others' lives, or as an interviewee from Kosovo summarized it:

> [Journalists] are afraid of what could happen if they provide the particular information and that might harm themselves or their families, be a subject to legal action and economic consequences. (Kosovar journalist, 43)

Journalists mainly attributed the roots of those fears to two origins. First, media owners in the region are also often politically engaged. The so-called co-existence of politics and journalism therefore injects political interests into the newsroom and thereby leads to more potential situations of self-censorship. As a result, stories that might be opposed to the owner's political stance are often abandoned at some point. The second main root of fear, according to our interviewees, stems from the economic dependency of media outlets. In the complicated situation of post-conflict society, media outlets are often dependent on economic support and advertisement. Therefore, journalists expressed the fact that they feared conflict with advertisers or influential economic figures and conglomerates. Consequently, strong interventions by media owners and editors, mostly due to political or economic reasons, made journalists internalize specific rules of what they are allowed to do and what they should not do. As a result, they self-censor themselves accordingly.

When journalists were asked for the *content* of the withdrawn stories, they mostly mention critical and investigative stories about political issues and scandals, economy and religious themes. Here, the mentioned issues were corruption of political actors in high functions, scandals that might affect powerful figures within the economy and hidden illegal action of the government. While those topics tend to be controversial for all our three cases, Serbian journalists also mentioned stories about war crimes and issues from the past wars as sensitive topics where they often have to censor themselves.

The main *consequences* of self-censorship are that some events do not make the news or enter the news in a softened version. As a result, one of our interviewees stated:

> Sometimes, I erase the story and I start writing it from the beginning, but many times I make softer the parts from the text that, I consider, will cause negative reactions at certain persons. (Macedonian journalist, 33)

Additionally, journalists stated that self-censorship also affects the way politics is reported in general. As a result, journalists are often reluctant to ask very critical questions when

talking to important political figures. Some of our interviewees stated that they are afraid that they might not receive invitations to press conferences or similar repercussions if they are too critical. Self-censorship's other consequence is manifest in daily routines, namely an increasing amount of so-called protocol journalism (see Andresen, 2015). This form of coverage mostly protocols and reports what is being said at a press appointment and is therefore used as a negative way of labeling uncritical forms of journalism (Andresen, 2009). While our interviewees, similar to most journalists, do not prefer to cover protocol events, they stated that they nonetheless have to do it usually as a request from the media for whom they work.

Overall, self-censorship often seems to be a product of the media's political and economic linkage. It mostly seems to affect stories about political leaders and sensitive political issues both on a national as well as on a local scale. The result of self-censorship is a less critical form of coverage that can be observable in interviews and the increasing amount of protocol journalism.

With the third research question, we aimed to demonstrate the usefulness of the conceptualization we put forward in the theoretical framework:

> *RQ3: What forms of self-censorship did journalists working in a post-conflict society experience?*

When asked for different situations in which they encountered self-censorship, our interviewees provided a large number of different examples. We mapped those examples through our systematization of self-censorship. The most commonly referenced form of self-censorship can be labelled public organizational. Here journalists decided not to cover a story because it did not match professional standards mostly in terms of the amount or credibility of their sources. This was directly followed by self-censorship that is motivated by personal expectations of the quality and news value of a story. Here the interviewees decided to step back from something because the reported piece did not match their personal standards (private professional self-censorship). Additionally, journalists described situations in which they held the stories back because they knew their editor would not like them. In accordance with our systematization, this form of self-censorship can be called public organizational self-censorship. In addition, our interviewees reported self-censorship as a precaution to avoid political pressure, so-called public political self-censorship. Only once mentioned were situations in which journalists self-censored themselves because a story might have had a negative impact on the paper's advertisers (public economic self-censorship) and where the resources for following a lead would have been too high (public procedural self-censorship).

Generally, it is obvious that our interviewees reported many different forms of self-censorship. Matching them to our conceptualization, we realized that most of these forms are public forms of self-restriction meaning an internalized reaction to an existing external agent of censorship. The marginalization of private self-censorship, however, might just be a result of the methodology used with journalists not willing to admit the influence of their own preferences on their work. Still the presented framework seems to be a good fit to systematize and compare different forms of self-censorship.

Conclusion

This article is the result of a longer discussion on censorship and media in the Balkans between the two authors and also a number of journalists in these countries. It led to an idea about self-censorship as a consequence of journalists' working conditions in Kosovo, Serbia and Macedonia. The fact that all three countries in this research remain 'partially free' according to Freedom House (2014, 2015) only confirms what journalists experience in the field and in the newsroom.

The analysis shows that most journalists encountered self-censorship in some form during their career. Self-censorship is often the result of fear and is mostly connected to political and economic issues, but also lacks clear and applicable ethical guidelines. The main consequence of self-censorship is a less critical form of coverage with journalists not being as critical as they should be and an increasing presence of so-called protocol journalism. When asked for different forms of self-censorship, our interviewees mostly reported public forms of self-restriction meaning self-censorship as a reaction to external pressure, expectations and guidelines. However, the presented theoretical framework seems to be a good fit for the analysis of self-censorship despite the rather low importance of the introduced private facets.

Our analysis finds that journalists in the Western Balkans react to external pressure in such a way that they avoid open conflict with the political and economically powerful. This leads to a state of co-existence where they exchange 'favors', an idea that had already been pointed out in previous research (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011; Lani, 2011; Örnebring, 2012). This situation is not improved by politicized media ownership and the lacking implementation of codes of ethics. In this regard, all three societies show clear similarities.

The research at hand was able to forcefully demonstrate the heightened importance of self-censorship in the region. It provides a helpful analytic tool for analyzing the matter in-depth. However, it does not come without limitations. The main shortcoming is the small sample of interviewed journalists. This was mostly due to budgetary reasons and the time intensive and costly procedure of building trust between interviewer and interviewee necessary to create useful data on such a sensitive issue.

In perspective, the presented findings should be a starting point for wider and deeper research into the newsrooms and journalistic cultures in the Western Balkans. Future studies should examine exactly how self-censorship is manifested among journalists. Thus, a combination of qualitative interviews and newsroom ethnographies could provide fruitful information in that regard.

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Notes

1. In international texts, the capital of Kosovo is usually spelled Pristina, whereas in local languages it is written Prishtina for Albanian and Pristina for Serbian. Following international practice, we choose to use 'Pristina' to avoid opting for any side of the conflict.
2. The idea of the existence of legitimate forms of self-censorship might be counter-intuitive especially to scholars from Western backgrounds. In this regard, the authors follow the notion that the decision of self-censorship's legitimacy might be (to some degree) influenced by cultural backgrounds. This is based on the authors' experiences while discussing the paper with non-Western scholars during an international conference. Since the evaluation of self-censorship's legitimacy is not this article's main focus, we will leave that discussion for future work.

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