

Reasons of self-censorship landscape for journalists

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Abstract

Self-censorship is a phenomenon that in different ways accompanies the professional life of every journalist. According to its effects, self-censorship appears as something "good" and "bad". It is seen as "good" when it influences in restricting the passions of individuals who are against moral and social norms of society, but it is quite different when it turns into a cloned individual who follows him, and warn him that he should not make any ideological mistake.

This paper will shed light on the main reasons that lead journalists to self-censorship and those reasons are raised in the form of research questions: How does censorship and self-censorship act among journalists ?; What are the factors that influence and support them?; What are the consequences of self-censorship among journalists and media employees?

For this study, there will be analysed different authors, supported by concrete facts occurring in media enterprises.

At the end of the study it will be given a concrete approach over the main reasons that lead to self-censorship.

Keywords: *censorship, self-censorship, political control, media owners, advertisers, propaganda.*

Overview on self-censorship

Censorship and self-censorship are parts of the same vicious circle. Censorship produces self-censorship and self-censorship means that there is an outer pressure for censorship. Such a definition of censorship - self-censorship relation will help us during this research

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paper to make a thorough and inclusive analysis, not excluding the functions and instruments that directly influence the individual, group, society and in particular the media as a form of communication and power of thought and reaction.

“Ordinary censorship typically provides us with a duality: a censoring authority and the censored communicator. How does the notion of censorship get a foothold when censor and censored are the same person,? We must suppose a duality within that person. One impulse or desire moves the person in the direction of expressing something, but some other impulse or desire controls the first.”¹

Evaluation of self-censorship has different meanings according to the framework it deals with. Defined in different forms, similar to each other, censorship appears as a practice by which individuals suppress and restrict their words and actions. Seen in this aspect, self-censorship, but also censorship have been a study subject in the field of sociology and psychology. Professor of social psychology at Standford University, Dale T. Miller, in his book "An Invitation to Social Psychology" writes about censorship and self-censorship. According to him,

Expressing and Censoring the Self, “Self censorship is inherently neither good nor bad. Certainly, some acts of self censorship reflect a failure of will, but others...reflect the presence of will power and bespeak courage rather than weakness. For people to successfully negotiate their social world, they must have the ability to suppress their private feelings and thoughts, and equally important, to disguise the fact that they are doing so... Self censorship is also essential to the smooth functioning of society. Civilised life would not be possible were people not able and willing to censor their strongest antisocial feelings,” he writes.²

Seen in semantic terms, censorship and self-censorship are two different terms, but as mentioned above are part of the same coin and

¹ Marlin, Randal. "The Muted Bugle: Self-Censorship and the Press." In *Interpreting Self-censorship in Canada*, by Klaus Petersen dhe Allan C. Hutchinson, 290-317. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999:291.

² Dale, T. Miller. "An Invitation To Social Psychology." Published by Cengage Learning, 2005. (<http://38is.blogspot.com/2012/05/lydia-lim.html>)

a vicious circle. "In censorship, the boundaries are drawn about what to write or not by the outside powers, such as governments and companies, so journalists or publisher have no choice but write or publish as they are directed. On the contrary, in self -censoring issue, journalists are not told to do things openly, but they censor themselves, hide some facts that they think would be dangerous to write."³

Self-censorship unlike censorship is a compromise act of creative personality's internal will to suit to the conjectural context of power, so that it can always be "correct" with the daily politics.

One of the most important writers of the twentieth century, *Danilo Kish*, (1935-1989), defines self-censorship:

Self-censorship is reading your personal text with foreign eyes, when you become self judged, even harsher than any other, as you also know the thing that censorious will never reveal in your text, the one that you kept silent and which you will never write in the paper, but it seems to have been remained 'between the lines'. Therefore, you add to your imaginative censorious such attributes, which you do not have. So your cloned personality persecutes your thoughts to the absurd, till the extreme, where everything is fluctuating, uncertain, and there is no way out: something dangerous and punitive waits for you.⁴

Subject of self-censorship is like a clone of a writer, which follows him, warning not to make any ideological mistake. And this cloned-censor is impossible to be clarified. It is just like an all knowing and overwatching Lord, because he is born from our brain, from our own fears, our self-illusions - says Kish.

"Self-censorship stretches from a wide understanding, seeing self-censorship as an everyday practice for any journalist anywhere in the world, caused by the inevitable selection and de-selection processes

³ Yeşil, Murat. "The Invisible Threat for the Future of Journalism: Self-Censorship and Conflicting Interests in an Increasingly Competitive Media Environment." *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, March 2014: 71-78.

⁴ Kish, Danilo. a.d. <http://www.litdic.ru/avtocenzura> (last visited 11.02.2015).

while reporting and editing; to a narrow definition, entailing only those practices which are performed for the sake of excluding information from publicity due to felt threats by public authorities..”⁵

Self-censorship is difficult to be measured. As such, it is evaluated according to several light contrasts of identifiable indicators that are incidents in official censorship. Other forms of evaluation are imprisonment of media employees, legislation contents on media, etc., which helps to establish precisely this comparative scale.

But, how does censorship and self-censorship act among journalists? What are the factors that influence and support them? What are the consequences of self-censorship among journalists and media employees? According to renown writer Zija Cela, editor in the late 80s of “Drita” newspaper (during totalitarian system), “In the communism period, it was the state that published and the power bought.”⁶

Is the journalist self-censored?

In the literature of the social sciences or on those of communication, you find very often anecdotes that generalize various social behavior. Such is the history told with the elephants, whose legs are tied with chains, so they cannot leave. After a while, when they are accustomed with the steel chains, even if they are released, you find them where you left, because the chains are recorded in their memory.

Self-censorship can be assessed as something “good” or “bad” depending on the approach. “Often the worst is not censorship, but self-censorship,” says Bernard Joubert, author of the “*Dictionary of*

⁵ Terje S. Skjerdal; *Justifying Self-censorship: A Perspective from Ethiopia; Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2010 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 7(2): 98-121. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

⁶ Çela, Zija. “Të gjithë kemi bërë kompromise për të botuar.” *Gazeta Shekulli*, 11.12.1992.

banned books and newspapers'' in an interview for the French newspaper, *Nouvel observateur*.⁷

Canadian professor of philosophy at Carleton University, Randal Marlin classifies the conditions that lead to self-censorship. According to Marlin, censorship can be classified in several ways.

First, there are the different *motives*. One common motive is economic, which could vary from the survival of a newspaper or magazine to simply fattening an already healthy revenue. Other motives might be political, or they might involve the desire to preserve one's life, health, or job.

Second, - says Marlin, - there are different *levels* at which censorship takes place. Some cases are purely personal, known only to the self-censor. Others are *institutional*, where, say, a higher authority within a newspaper rules against publication approved at a lower level.

According to the Canadian professor, *third*, self-censorship might be thought in terms of the form it takes. To accommodate a publisher's known bias, a reporter might use words such as 'regime' instead of 'government' against his or her better journalistic judgement.

Fourth, self-censorship might be distinguished in the light of the different sorts of *pressures* that make it likely. One large category would be all cases where formal censorship exists, because self-censorship tends to be a kind of penumbra extending beyond the official boundaries of prohibited expression.⁸

Various authors present various reasons that encourage self-censorship.

"What is the most disturbing thing related to the censorship is that in many cases it is voluntary," writes George Orwell in the foreword of *Animal Farm* book: "Whoever has lived in a foreign country for some times, may find some information, that should have been the headlines of newspapers but were ignored by the British media, and

⁷ Joubert, Bernard. *L'OBS*. 23 01 2013. <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/vu-sur-le-web> (visited on 11. 02. 2015).

⁸Marlin, Randal. "The Muted Bugle: Self-Censorship and the Press." In *Interpreting Self-censorship in Canada*, by Klaus Petersen dhe Allan C. Hutchinson, 290-317. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

this was not as a result of any intervention by the government. It seems that there was a silent agreement not to "publish such facts"⁹.

Meanwhile, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky list five different types of filters which operate on the mass media and promote this phenomenon. These are:

1. Structure and business orientation, ownership and profit
2. Advertisement where mass media rely in most cases
3. Reliance on the information provided by government, business or experts funded by the above mentioned sources
4. Criticism within the discipline of media
5. "Anticommunism" as something similar to state religion that acts as a controlling mechanism.¹⁰

Fear as self-defense act

Fear as an act of self-defense is believed to be a key reason for self-censorship. "Seen in this aspect, censorship occurs when journalist and media are not governed by editorial concerns, but by fear."¹¹ "Fear of losing their jobs or risk for their lives are reasons that force many journalists not to write about what they have found out and push them to hide facts discovered as a result of their research. This act constitutes what we call self-censorship."¹²

Conditions of journalists employment are issues that affect the quality of the information product. According to a 2012 survey, it was reported that only 42 percent of surveyed journalists had regular contracts during employment period, 26 percent had a partial

⁹Orwell, George. *Ferma e kafshëve*. Tiranë: Onufri, 2006.

¹⁰Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media*, 1-35. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

¹¹White, Aidan. *Ethical Journalism Network*. a.d. <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/en/contents/fear-in-the-news-the-difference-between-self-censorship-and-ethical-journalism> (Vizituar më 12. 02. 2015).

¹² Yeşil, Murat. "The Invisible Threat for the Future of Journalism: Self-Censorship and Conflicting Interests in an Increasingly Competitive Media Environment." *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, March 2014: 71-78.

contract, while 32 percent of them did not have a contract at all.¹³ In the 2013 report, AJU reported that "in the last six months journalists salaries were delayed in 75 percent of the media, for a period of two to six months. During this period, 48 journalists had sued the owners for job dismissal or disrespect of Labor Code."¹⁴ "The concern was raised again in 2015 when AJU head, Alexander Çipa noted the lack of payment of social security contributions for hundreds of journalists from 1990 until now."¹⁵

"If you do not find the courage to overcome fear, self-censorship will spread, and not only in media."¹⁶, writes the prestigious British journal, *The Guardian*, shortly after the terrorist attacks on the editorial board of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on January 7, 2015.

Propaganda as self-censoring source

Jacques Ellul estimates mass media as one of the most important instruments for propaganda existence. "Propaganda means a propagator and someone who receives this propaganda; propagator is the one who knows; the other group is made by those who do not know, the fools, as Simiand says. The one who knows, teaches those that do not know."¹⁷

"In order to organise propaganda, there should be a focused media. The impact would be greater if various media are focused on

¹³ UGSH. *Praktikat e punës informale në median shqiptare*. Vjetor, Tiranë: Unioni i Gazetarëve Shqiptarë, 2012: 38.

¹⁴ UGSH. *Statement of the Union of Albanian Journalists*. Tirana. 21 September 2013.

¹⁵ Çipa, Aleksandër. *Deklaratë për shtyp*. Dita e miqësisë, Durres. 24 February 2015.

¹⁶ Cohen, Nick. *The Guardian*. 11 Janar 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/11/paris-attacks-we-must-overcome-fear-or-selfcensorship-will-spread> (Vizituar më 14 Shkurt, 2015).

¹⁷Balle, Francis. *Mediat & shoqëritë*. Tiranë: Papirus, 2011: 743.

the same hand.”¹⁸ "In cases where individuals are connected to a certain media, may this be a newspaper, radio, television, or any other, there is a higher possibility of falling prey to propaganda.

Related to the way a medium affects the masses, Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan considers that the same message can have quite different effects, depending on the transmitting media. McLuhan states: "medium is the message. What matters is not the content of the message, but the way this message is transmitted.”¹⁹

Preliminary restrictions

These are the most open and harmful forms of censorship that cause self-censorship. State authorities through an established system require prior control of any material destined for publication or broadcasting. Later, it is formally decided by the censors if this material will be distributed or not.²⁰

This kind of restriction is found mainly in totalitarian regimes. In Albania, preliminary restrictions occurred throughout the communist history from 1945 until 1991. Moreover, in the *Constitution* of 1976, this restriction was emphasized even more by the infamous nr. 55 Article on "agitation and propaganda against the state”²¹

Preliminary restrictions are widely observed even in reporting during the war period. US Supreme Court suggests that censorship on media during wartime may be allowed in four cases. These four cases are: (1) denial of access to locations; (2) denial of access to documents and photographs; (3) punishment for publishing national security information; (4) self-censorship by the news media.²²

¹⁸Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda; The Formation of Mens`s Attitudes*. New York: Random House of Canada Limited, 1973:102.

¹⁹ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964:2.

²⁰ Sturges, Paul. a.d. <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/faife/publications/sturges/self-censorship.pdf> (visited on Janaary 04, 2015).

²¹ Constitution. "LIGJ Nr.5506, datë 28.12.1976, Neni 55." Tirana, 28 December 1976.

²² Chapter 3, The First Amendment, contemporary problems, f.87

Political control over media as self censorship impetus

There are several possible forms of such a censorship, where political control over the media exist. Peter T. Lesson and Christopher J. Coyne, American scholars of communication, mentioned the following four factors as the main ones affecting media manipulation:

- a. Direct control via State Owned Media Outlets
- b. Indirect Control via State Owned Media Infrastructure
- c. Indirect Control via Financial Pressure
- d. Indirect Control via Entry Regulation ²³

Direct control via State Owned Media Outlets. Occurs when media are totally owned by the state and it is not difficult to imagine how the government could influence the flow of information. These media enterprises are financed entirely by the state, thus they do not depend on private shareholders. In the case of public media, it is not difficult to understand the governmental influence on the media product. Even nowadays, the Albanian law provides governing bodies of institutions that monitor the operation of the media sector. Those bodies are elected with the consent of the parliament.

Indirect Control via State Owned Media Infrastructure. If media bodies are privately owned, but vital means of production and distribution are monopolized in the state's hands, still government control over media remains strong. These tools in state hands may vary, such as: the state monopoly on printing, distribution of newspapers etc.

Indirect Control via Financial Pressure. This is another way of censorship on media enterprises and promotes self-censorship on media employees. In addition to public ones, there are also many private media, which survive in the market competition by just relying on advertising revenue from the state budget.

Indirect Control via Entry Regulation. Through various instruments the government may allow or reject the introduction of media

²³ Leeson, Peter T., and Christopher J. Coyne. "Manipulating the Media" *Institutions and Economic Development* 1, no. 2 (November 2011).

enterprises. In this way, the rules set by state authorities constitute a method of control. The rules introduced by the authorities that regulate the introduction of a new media have a direct affect on media control and manipulation.

Actions with legal consequences

It leaves room for judging the person in action, as well as an opportunity to debate on the issue. It allows everyone who has an information and wants to make it public to think about the consequences which he/she might face. But the idea that one's case may face a lawsuit or court order, not necessarily precludes the individual to act as he wishes. He can publish the information and accepts to face the law.

For example, if a journalist publishes information that insults, defames or performs similar offenses against another person, at the request of the insulted one the case is handled by the respective courts. In support of the insulted party, the Penal Code articles 119, 120, 121, 122 and 123 provide a series of punishments against the defendant.

Media ownership

According to the model under which media operate today, reports between media owners and media employees, including actors that enable each media output can be analyzed in two ways. Firstly, according to the logic of market economy where companies intend maximum financial benefits in a short time. Secondly, according to reports that the owners have with political representatives (especially with those in power), and special groups of interest.

A form of institutional self-censorship appears to protect the owner from the content. "Basically, owners, similarly as politicians, at public stations operate through personnel policy: Who appoints and orders editors, checks content trends." (Stephan Russ Mohl: 283)

Talking about relations between journalists and managers, Information Director at ABC News, Armand Shkullaku says that there

are no professional debates for ideas, topics, investigations etc., but simply there is a professional editorial control that turns out to be a control for satisfying the owners.²⁴

Limitations of conformity

These restrictions relate to the fear of going against social expectations. Restrictions coming from conformism exceed the limits of personal boundaries. They turn to support tools of censorship and strengthen its impact. This is more evident in closed groups of small communities, which may be representatives of ethnicity, religion etc. "Science also shows clear patterns of self-censorship. Quite recently a group of editors of scientific journals urged scientists to use restraint in writing about biomedical and chemical research that could be used by terrorists."²⁵

Reports between media and advertisers

"The influence of advertisers is more obvious in times of economical crisis, when a structural dependence from advertising is created, because those who do not provide a good advertising environment cannot catch the advertising market. "(Russ-Mohl 2010,284)

Advertisings is one of the primary objectives of the media owners. Seen in this aspect, the ratio between the media and advertisers appears in two directions; First, the designing of such programs or sections that attract as much advertising as possible. Secondly, the relation with advertisers turns into a dependence relationship to one another. As a result media fears to provide information that oppose the interests of the other party.

²⁴ Shkullaku, Armand. "Karakteristikat e menaxhimit redaksional në Shqipëri dhe Kosovë." In *Media në demokratizim*, Grup autorësh, 180-184. Tirana: Papirus, Fondacioni Konrad Adenauer, Departament of Journalism and Communication, 2015.

²⁵ Sturges, Paul. a.d. <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/faife/publications/sturges/self-censorship.pdf> (visited on 04 Janaary, 2015).

“When businesses threaten to sue over critical investigative journalism pieces or to cancel advertising, an editor or news director must decide whether to use a provocative story, even if it risks the loss of revenue or the loss of his or her own job. Thus self-censorship resulting from this dilemma, and others, may be the most prevalent form of censorship influencing the content of the media.”²⁶ About this phenomenon Marlin says: “When newspapers are ruled by advertising, it is difficult to believe that editorial content will be completely honest”.

According to Herman and Chomsky “the power of advertisers over television programming stems from the simple fact that they buy and pay for the programs – they are the patrons who provide the media subsidy.”²⁷

Pressures of ethnical and religious groups

In an editorial titled *Why I published those cartoons*, Flemming Rose, the culture editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* explains the reasons why on September 30, 2005 he decided to publish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. The main reason that Rose says is the significant increase of self-censorship among journalists and artists about the contents published on the elements of Islam.. Rose argues that the attempt to take a step against the violation of free speech and self-censorship of journalists justifies what happened.²⁸ It is exactly this way of thinking and acting, which promotes the fear among journalists about the way they should report. These clashes with ethnic or religious character push journalists to self censorship.

²⁶Johnson, Nicholas. *Global Issues, media and ethics* (Department State) 6, no. 1 (2001): 6-9.

²⁷Herman, Edward S., dhe Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*, . New York: Pantheon Books, 1988: 16

²⁸Rose, Flemming. *Washington Post*. 19 Shkurt 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html> (Vizituar më 20 Janar, 2015).

Information Sources

"If journalists would focus mainly on official information, they would return to official turntables, while the concept of freedom of the press would have very little to do with the rights of citizens to be informed."²⁹ "Often, materials of high sensitivity come from sources, which must remain anonymous in order to protect themselves."³⁰ "But, sources of information, beyond the importance it may have for the journalist, may turn into a pressure on media employees.

On the other hand, there are some people who think that multiple sources of information can cause dependency and problems while reporting. According to Kovac and Rosenstiel, it is much more appreciated the use of anonymous sources for factual material, than the use of anonymous sources which express opinion.³¹

Ethics and public policy as self-censoring means

There are very few ethicists who would say that lying, or similar terms that are considered negative, are actions that can never be morally justified.

On the influence of ethics and public policy on censorship, Randal Marlin says that there are some cases that it can be justified. Such may be the desire to reduce ethnic violence, by not publishing it, journalists and editors precede igniting a violent atmosphere in public. Marlin adds that even if so, there are strong arguments that such facts should be reported.

Marlin estimates that there exist data proving that when news distributors are not trusted, people rely for information on alternative, unscrupulous sources, including traditional propaganda and rumors

²⁹ Wilhelm, Patricia. "Mbrojtja e burimeve të informacionit. Media: Rrugët drejt lirisë." Në *Diskutim për etikën*, nga ISHM, 147-152. Tiranë: Instituti Shqiptar i Medias, 2007.

³⁰Kovach, Bill, dhe Tom Rosenstiel. *Si të njohësh të vërtetën në epokën e mbingarkesës së infomacionit*. Tiranë: Instituti Shqiptar i Medias, 2014:83.

³¹Kovach dhe Rosenstiel: 84

network. Also, due to the existence of new means of communication such as fax and Internet, self-censorship is not likely to work.³²

But what legitimizes hiding the truth? Should the possible social consequences of terrible exaggerated materials publication be thought? What about those dealing with violation of individual's dignity and attracting public's attention?

The policy of contemplating such questions based on the view that the information industry will be involved in moral assessments, transforming so into an elitist approach, does not seem right. According to research scholar Marlin, what should be carefully seen is whether self censorship criteria is applied in an objective and non-selective way against a group or disadvantaged group.

There can be an excuse in situations when dealing with stereotypes of certain ethnic and religious groups or other groups similar to them. This attempt to cover up the truth and to combat false stereotypes may be acceptable to the point of not stressing the facts that support the existing distortion, but it should not favour the counterfeiting of reality.

It is important for journalists, editors and publishers to be vigilant against various pressures that distract them from their central mission. They should be fair in performing their job to inform the public, despite these pressures, whether they are motivated from various social forms or not.

Conclusions

This paper is mainly focused on the definition of *self-censorship*, viewed in the light of different authors and renowned scholars of the field.

What should be clarified is that *self-censorship*, unlike *censorship* is a phenomenon that cannot be measured in an exact manner. Even if it is agreed that this kind of censorship is a key characteristic of repressive media environments, groups and press freedom organizations face the challenge to determine the level of self-censorship and the basis of

³²Po aty

specific indicators. In so doing they can make the difference between different countries and media enterprises.

What is clearly observed is that the causes that lead journalists to self-censorship are similar, beyond the level of democracy in which the respective media operate.

Despite the various instruments used for control, the desire of politics to influence the media remains almost the same in developed democracies, developing countries, and even in totalitarian ones.

The pressure of media owners, their relations with state agencies and advertisers still remain important sources of self-censorship.

The conditions in which journalists work, insecurity and fear of job loss are other self-censoring elements that force journalists to be part of media propaganda at the department where they belong.

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