

The Reins on Freedom:

Self-Censorship in the Hungarian Press

Self-censorship is like melted snow. It will seep under your collar.

— Péter Esterházy, in an interview for *Der Standard*, April 9, 2011

A girl is crying in the newsroom. The place is Hungarian radio on a foggy Sunday night sometime in December 2010. She sheds her tears on scattered pieces of paper. On the bottom of the pile is a large bundle containing the draft of the Media Act, which is awaiting imminent adoption. “No way I can find a single media lawyer who would defend this crap,” she says. “Everyone in the clip will be jeering at it. I will be fired for this.” In vain do I try calm her saying it is not a single clip that must conform to the requirement of “balanced reporting,” within the meaning of the effective Media Act as well as according to the ethical rules of the profession, but the entire show. But those tears continue flowing. Even though it is obviously just the two of us in the newsroom, we are having company — at least in spirit — courtesy of an internal censor who, to quote John Keane, “warns us that there is too much at stake [and] makes us zip our lips, tremble and think twice, with a smile.”¹ Once again, certain expectations have been sharply contradicted by reality, at a time when radio news programs in Hungary are increasingly subject to the command to tailor reality to the expectations. This climate was ushered in by the new executives appointed in the fall by the Media Council, itself controlled by Fidesz, the country’s ruling party.

In the first few months of 2012, more than a year after Parliament had passed the new Media Act, we at the Standards Media Monitor wanted to find out about the workings of self-censorship in the Hungarian press, both the public service media financed from the taxpayer’s money and privately-owned press organs — about the ways self-censorship can be correlated with the new provisions of law, the changes brought about by the revised legal environment, and about other factors at play in the recent prevalence of self-censorship. Between January and late March, I conducted eight in-depth interviews with journalists, each with at least ten years of experience in and a broad perspective on the profession, having worked in various media (printed, online, and electronic) as junior staff and middle managers. Most of the interviews were taped, and each journalist insisted on remaining anonymous. The interviews form the basis of a survey to be conducted by Standards Media Monitor to gauge the current status of freedom of the press in Hungary; the survey results will be published in the fall. The present article has been therefore written more with the aim of grasping the outlines of the phenomenon. Needless to say, the results of the in-depth interviews are far from being representative.

Let's talk about self-censorship!

"Self-censorship? Damn, I can't think of anything," blurted out one of my subjects when I asked him to recall any experiences that could be associated with this word. In fact, almost every one of my subjects proved rather difficult to interview on the topic in intimate detail, at least at first. This is hardly surprising, as it takes considerable human and professional awareness to recognize self-censorship when one sees it. It is often difficult to distinguish from the kind of normal self control that all of us rely on — let alone from sheer conformism, which often goes with it hand in hand.

The complexity of the phenomenon under scrutiny made for very interesting experiences when I asked my subjects to define what they mean by self-censorship, where they drew the lines between self control, conformism, and self-censorship. *"It's when my professional conscience tells me I should do something but I won't do it, or even do something just the opposite."* *"It's when you know your boundaries as assigned by the given organization and toe the line in a proactive way. You don't wait to be told but go ahead on your own; when you are aware of their expectations and you meet those expectations head-on, even if you disagree with them."* *"It's when I don't do something, or do it differently than as would be dictated by professional convictions."* In light of these definitions, articulated by the journalist I interviewed, self-censorship appears to be the act whereby the journalist discerns and draws the boundaries of his own freedom, and proceeds to observe those boundaries in spite of his best professional convictions.

"Of course, everyone censors oneself," pointed out one of my subjects tersely. Once they had surmounted the difficulties of the abstract definition, they all opened up and told me dozens of real-life stories about when they acted in defiance of their best professional convictions. The endemic nature of the phenomenon can be glimpsed from the a recent online survey conducted by the policy analysis and consultancy institute Nézőpont Intézet in 2012, the interim results of which were made public at a conference at the end of February.² According to the survey findings, 23 percent of the journalists asked do not consider Hungarian press to be free, while 38 percent believe it is free in part only. In other words, 61 percent of professional journalists are aware of at least some degree of freedom deficit in the media. Even more to the point, 48 percent claimed to have been forced during the previous year to act contrary to their professional convictions at least once (18%), on several occasions (26%), or even on a regular basis (4%). Only 44 percent said that nothing like this had happened to them.

In a democratic system, such a high ratio of journalists reporting a freedom deficit and a sense of coercion to contravene their own principles seems to indicate that the mechanisms of self-censorship have gained ground in this country. Needless to say, these results cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence and require further study, if only because the survey questions did not explicitly address the issue of self-censorship.

Incidentally, whereas self-censorship is often understood as a by-product of formal censorship, the version spreading in the Hungarian media serves as evidence that self-censorship may survive and even flourish in a democratic context not only as cultural heritage

from a dictatorial past, but quite independently of this baggage as well. “*At our publication, plenty of slack is left in the reins,*” said a journalist working for a nationwide daily. This utterance is so astounding because it could easily have been spoken by any journalist active during the Kádár era, particularly in the 1980’s. This assessment assumes that freedom only reaches as far as the reins will let it go: Although everything is permissible within those limits, the flexibility of the reins and the intention behind the hands that hold them render the maneuvering room variable in time and space. The existence of such symbolic reins has been corroborated by each of my interview subjects, since they are all aware of the lines of demarcation at the workplace that assign far narrower limits to the activities of the journalist than would be allowed, indeed dictated, by the inherent ethical rules of the trade.

Watchdogs and the régime

These in-depth interviews, conducted with journalists more than 20 years after the democratic transition, suggest that most of them have no problems with the way they see their own role and involvement, albeit there are also signs that some of Hungary’s journalists remain somewhat confused and swayed by the traditions of the Kádár era when it comes to conceiving of their function.

The majority of the subjects unambiguously defined their mission as monitoring the powers that be rather than being an organic part of the mechanisms of those powers, although they almost invariably hasten to add that they are unable to fulfill this mission in its entirety due to reasons beyond their control. “*I am the freedom fighter type, I seek the truth instinctively. Whether I can achieve it in practice is another matter altogether.*” “*The call of journalism is always to exercise control over power, but how well we manage to do it would take us too far... It’s not quite as simple as that.*” Apart from these typical views, one journalist identified his task with reference to the political camp he professed himself sympathetic with: “*We are constructively critical with those on our side. It may sound like a cliché, but we get mad for their own sake.*”

As evidenced by the survey of the Nézőpont Intézet I have quoted above, individual aspirations tend to tally with what society expects of journalists. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents on average awarded 3.93 points to the assertion that the media is first and foremost destined to bear the interests of society in mind. At the same time, however, the survey also reveals that the conflict erupts between the individual and his environment. The very same journalists gave only 2.59 points to the claim that the media does fulfill the mission identified above. More truth (3.64 points) was found in the proposition that the press seeks to satisfy the owners more than professional expectations.³

All this goes to show that it is in vain that journalists are by and large aware of the course of action they are supposed in a democratic context, and in vain do they know the rules of the game of their own trade, when their environment holds them accountable to expectations other than those that come with the profession. Let me quote just a few of the statements on this from the interviews. “*No matter whom you work for, the owner will always be loyal to one camp or another, and it is professionally impossible to meet such standards.*” “*There is pressure from the company to minimize conflict with the powers that be, to make sure that no*

one interferes with the finance and the advertising, and for the owners to have an easier time if it comes to a buyout or a merger.” “I sensed the most intense pressure at public television, but the private media had the same problem everywhere. There was always some other interest at play, political or from the side of business and advertising — or both simultaneously, because these two often go hand in hand.”

Indeed, it is conceivable that non-professional expectations are communicated to journalists by professional executives. Conversely, the journalist will have a better chance to qualify for a mid-level or senior executive position if he undertakes the obligation to put this kind of pressure on his own team. While it is true that more precisely targeted survey questions would be needed to understand just how common this phenomenon is, it is also a fact that my subjects often raised the issue in the in-depth interviews.

One journalist told me, rather bluntly, that *“editors-in-chief think of themselves as being part of the political-economic power structure. They have tendencies and occasionally political objectives as well. As a result, a story that fails to satisfy these expectations never get published, or else must be written to conform to them.”* Another subject related how, in his previous job, *“journalists functioned as quasi-opposition vis á vis the editor-in-chief. The climate was often extremely heated. Sometimes we would have chairs flying around the room, because there was no end to expectations no journalist worthy of the name would be willing to fulfill.”*

In public media, too, it was clearly the editors and editors-in-chief who mediated to the staff expectations that were impossible to justify professionally but which simply served the interests of government propaganda. *“The morning meeting made it obvious what the message of the day, what the overall concept was supposed to be, and we had to shoot the reports with that in mind. There was virtually no relevance to what the interviewed individuals happened to be saying — they had been selected to toe the line anyway — because anything they might have said that did not conform to the concept was cut out. When I was working on a story, they would be standing behind my back, practically dictating what I was supposed to write. If I used the wrong word, they had me change it. They even told me how to do the cutaways.”*

Indirectly, through professional superiors, is not the only way pressure is exerted in the editorial office. Some of the people I talked with reported direct influence from politicians and company executives and, in some cases, expectations being relayed to journalists by the advertising department. One of my subjects recalled that one daily had years before fired a journalist delegated to a political party, because *“the party thought the stories he wrote up about them were unsatisfactory.”* Several leading politicians were said to regularly phone assigned journalists to discuss with them, at length if need be, what they have written about them and why. *“Some will argue about specific adjectives, others about photo angle and setup. One person took issue with our cover editing principles, because we had given headline space to a topic he didn’t feel comfortable with.”* In places known to be loyal to one party or another, some politicians make demands on journalists and editors for entire reports. Because the financing of the paper, radio or television channel is often at the mercy of the given political camp, these demands simply mean existential — and sometimes barefaced —

pressure for the journalist. *“Some of them will tell you point-blank to stop acting such a busy-body, because they own the station,”* someone said. Another journalist, speaking about the petering out of financing from the political left, related that certain editors *“had begun to snub left-wing politicians who called in, saying if you don’t pay, you can’t call the shots.”* Of course, the truth behind this “gutsy” rejection is that the same editors had yielded to pressure much more easily as long as the funds kept flowing.

By and large, the interviews reveal that nearly all self-censorship is bred by anxiety over one’s livelihood. *“My greatest fear is about finding myself on the street all of a sudden. So I try not to make waves.”* In someone else’s experience: *“I’ve burned my fingers before and got almost fired. But I had to think of the kids and the mortgage, and now I have come round and play by the rules.”*

Taboos and packaging

The continuity with the Kádár era is also evidenced by the fact that practicing journalists I asked had no problem whatsoever recognizing the typology of self-censorship discussed in a study on the political control of media in those days — and they recognized it 22 years after 1990, the year that era officially ended.⁴

Glossing over issues in silence remains one of the most common forms of self-censorship. *“From the get-go, I won’t even put a topic on the table if I know they won’t let it go through or that it will create political resentment among my superiors,”* said a staff member of a medium admittedly loyal to one political camp, adding: *“I am also aware of which experts and politicians are undesirable where I work, so I won’t even have a go at it.”* Another journalist defined thematic choices as *“the non plus ultra of self-censorship.”* Yet another jokingly informed me he had “obviously no intention to expose [his] owners.” This same person conceded that the owners of the paper were affiliated with political parties through several channels, and that therefore *“revealing their dealings would certainly be in the interest of the public.”*

However, the web of suppression is hardly unique to those papers that can be regarded as committed ideologically or to certain political parties; the phenomenon has reached the purely commercial media. *“With us, it is a no-no to attack certain politicians in their person. It is a tacit internal agreement. So we refrain from stories that could be suitable for character assassination, and the business tycoons close to a party also constitute taboos. The usual pretext is of course that these issues are too complex. Let us look instead into another economic topic that has direct relevance to people’s pockets,”* revealed the editor of a commercial television station. He added that the media authority, while not expressly untouchable, was a topic they liked to avoid. *“I started digging into this story once,”* an online journalist said. *“I suddenly found myself stopped by my bosses after one of the advertisers threatened to cancel his annual contract. The editor-in-chief called me into his office and gave it to me to understand we had better let up on this story for the time being.”*

Another common form of self-censorship is what we call “packaging:” presenting or relaying criticism and sensitive facts in a more agreeable form — in short, euphemism. One of my

subjects mentioned an interesting variety of packaging when he related how the public service media routinely replaced terminology disliked by the Fidesz-run government (such as *reform* or *austerity*) by words favored by official propagandists (such as *reorganization* or *renewal*). Another person I talked with made reference to the tradition, also rooted in Kádár-era media practices, of “*masking risqué statements of fact in the cloak of opinion*,” given that an opinion column “*will be universally felt to be a freer genre*.” Another existing tactic is to “outsource” sensitive and provocative content to blogs, then proceeding to merely cite those blogs in the paper itself.

Greater or lesser?

When I asked my interview subjects about the extent to which they thought the adoption of the new Media Act, at the end of 2010, had an impact on self-censorship, almost everyone answered “*none*” or “*made no difference one way or another*” — if only because, as they put it, “*self-censorship had always been confined to narrower limits than those assigned by laws and regulations*.” “*Self-censorship has intensified not because of the Media Act, but because of the two-third majority push of executive power, the unprecedented leverage of that power, and the rise of the Fidesz party. They have their own people sitting in all the institutions that had been regarded as independent before, and this has repercussions on the journalists as well. And if journalists feel less free, they will be less free*,” explained one of my sources, who considered the adoption of the Media Act to have been a milestone in this process, albeit only one of the many factors. “*The ownership relations in the media are chaotic*,” declared another journalist, “*with no transparency to the interests of various owners. Party finance is entangled with media financing. Political and economic influence is exerted through public and private advertising. All these factors play a far greater role in shaping self-censorship than does the Media Act*.” This journalist sees the Media Act as “*a weapon that need not even be fired to make an impact in the heads, given the menacing atmosphere we all happen to be in. It’s like the arms race was back then: It’s not about anyone really wanting to start a nuclear war. It was enough just to talk about it*.” He goes on to add that the Media Act is the culmination of a process commenced 20 years ago. For this process, the left is at least as much to blame as the right, for both stand to benefit from the erosion of the freedom of the press.

¹ John Keane, *Media and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, cited in: Róbert Takács, *Sajtóirányítás és újságírói öncenzúra az 1980-as években* [“*Control of the Press and Self-Censorship in Journalism in the 1980’s*”], Médiakutató, Spring 2005. The study has been used as theoretical foundation for the present report.

² Lecture delivered by Csaba Molnár of the Nézőpont Intézet. February 29, 2012, Goethe Institute.

³ Lecture delivered by Csaba Molnár of the Nézőpont Intézet. February 29, 2012, Goethe Institute.

⁴ Róbert Takács, *Sajtóirányítás és újságírói öncenzúra az 1980-as években* [“*Control of the Press and Self-Censorship in Journalism in the 1980’s*”], Médiakutató, Spring 2005.