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# **Media Ethics Challenges in EU Coverage in Poland, Romania and Spain**

**Damian GUZEK<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

In contemporary media systems, the level of Media Ethics verifies the general level of media professionalism. On the other hand, Media Ethics remain one of the most fragile aspects of journalistic work, determined by changes in the social, economic and political factors. In fact, the current global crisis determines the changes in the praxis of journalists' work.

In this chapter the author focuses on the level of ethical dimensions in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media and shows the most current ethical challenges for the media professionals of these three countries when covering EU issues.

The research focuses on content analysis of a number of nationwide Polish, Romanian and Spanish online newspapers, radio services and TV news. The comparative perspective of the collected data helps to understand the differences of the ethical approach in the media of these three countries.

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The analysis of strengths and weaknesses of each country focused on the Media Ethics issues helps to understand how the ethical demands in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media deal with rapid changes in the journalistic work.

**Keywords:** media ethics, Polish journalists, Spanish journalists, Romanian journalists, comparative analysis

## **Introduction**

It is very common to analyze the modern media landscape from the point of view called the 'digital revolution'. General tendencies such as media convergence, tabloidization, the use of tablets and iPhones, show a new pattern of media functioning in the society. The media context remains a combination of these long-term tendencies with shorter but very influencing phenomena such as the global crisis. The effects of these contaminations may be seen especially in journalism. The character of journalistic work and the level of journalistic ethics is changing. In fact the media content becomes a silent witness of a new way of journalistic praxis.

Just before the start of the crisis, Richard Keeble claimed that "ethical inquiry is crucial for all media workers – and managers" (Keeble, 2004, p. 2). The rapid changes in journalism during the crisis have highlighted the diversity of current approaches to media ethics and different perspectives on the main duties of journalists, editors and other media workers.

The level of media ethics verifies the general level of media professionalism. On the other hand, Media Ethics remain one of the most fragile aspects of journalistic work, determined by changes in social, economic and political factors. We may address the following questions: is it possible to set the actual level of media ethics, its origins and consequences?; is it possible to find a common way of understanding and practicing the media ethics?; if the economic crisis influences the journalists' work, what should the antidote for losing the level of journalistic ethics be? These and other questions show the importance of the problem.

### **Materials and methods**

The aim of this chapter is to identify and analyze the main challenges of journalistic profession in Poland, Romania and Spain. It is possible to achieve the objective by looking at the effects of the journalists' work in these three countries. The data on the coverage of the European Union, collected from the period of one month under the form of a content analysis, (from 21 January to 21 February 2013) can be treated as an entry point for the study on ethical issues. The research was carried out by three groups. Each group conducted the content analysis of three nationwide online media in different media sectors. In Poland the research was based on the online edition of the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, TV news broadcast *Fakty* on channel *TVN*, and radio news broadcast on radio station *RMF FM*. In Romania the research was conducted on the basis of the online edition of the newspaper *Adevărul*, news broadcast

*Pro TV* on channel *PRO TV* and news from the public radio station. In Spain the research material was obtained from the online edition of the newspaper *El País*, TV news broadcasts on public channel *TVE1* and radio news from the public radio station *RNE*. The first step of the procedure was the analysis of the project's data from the perspective of the media ethics matters. It helped to isolate the problems strongly related to the media ethics and indicate the boundaries of the undertaken research.

Afterwards, we compared the highlighted ethical issues in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media. The comparative analysis showed the diversity of current approaches to media ethics and some of the challenges that face the journalism in these countries. Naturally, the conducted research had been designed for different objectives, nonetheless, their results turned out to be useful in establishing the 'challenges' of the journalism ethics in Poland, Romania and Spain.

### **Conceptualizing the professional journalism ethics**

Most of the researchers agree that the ethical dimensions remain a crucial part of nationwide media systems. In the postmodern times it seems that the level of ethical regulations influences the general level of the character of media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, pp. 33-45). In fact, an important question needs to be asked: if there are so many different specific aspects, is it possible to compare the level of journalism in different countries?

The results of a lot of research and empirically grounded studies show that in the democratic

countries ethical issues have the idea of media professionalism in common. Overall, the problem of professions in society interested researchers, such as Emile Durkheim, Max Webber and Talcott Parsons. Most of the contributions boil down to two main approaches: 'Functionalist' and the 'neo-Weberian' (Nordenstreng, 1998, p. 125).

In the functionalist approach the professions take over the position of religion based on providing the social harmony associated with rational and ethical standards of society in action. In media, these standards "prescribe how journalists should work to avoid harming or distressing others" (Hanna, 2005, p. 75). The approach treats the journalists as guarantees of values, such as truth or fairness, in media. The position of a single journalist, as a part of national or international group of journalists, is crucial for the functionalist approach. The journalists are involved in promoting peace and international understanding, but they are also supposed to maintain the status of their profession. But what is the reason for it? The answer is simple: they are the owners of communication rights and freedoms (Nordenstreng, 1998, p. 127).

The neo-Weberian approach treats the society as an ultimate owner of information. It is relevant to the journalism ethics because of the change of the reference point of the media work. Because the self-centered journalism perspective creates a wall between journalists and their audience, in this approach a mixture of journalists' and audience objectives takes place. In fact, this paradigm delivers the category of 'quality' of information as an

argument “for collective decision-making in the society” (White, 1995, p. 442).

Surprisingly, the category of ‘quality’ does not take a lot of attention of media ethics scholars. Most of the authors deal with media ethics issues in a traditional way, focusing on the ethical values and its impact on journalistic work. Some of the studies in the past two decades express increasing contradictions between the ideas and the praxis of journalism profession (ex. Norhstedt and Ekström, 1994), in addition, a few studies confirm that the global crisis has an impact on journalistic issues (Cottle, 2008, pp. 27-42; Głowacka, 2013, pp. 29-46).

As a dictionary entry, ‘quality’ refers to something “very good or well made” (Gillard, 2003, p. 1018), so the quality information needs to be understood simply as information prepared in a right way. As already mentioned, the quality of information remains connected with the general quality of decision-making in the society. Open access to the information stimulates the building-process of the so-called public sphere. Publication of the news opens the society for new forms of communication different than the spontaneous, interpersonal or institutional forms (Jachimowski, 2006, p. 145).

So what kind of information quality can there be identified? In terms of the content analysis, the main attributes that can be measured in order to display the quality of information are the following:

- authorship of the media materials, with names and surnames;

- number of sources of information – it refers to the question: how many sources of information were shown? was there only one or more than one source of information?
- type of the journalistic genres – it refers to the question: What kind of materials were preferred? Information or opinions?

The above-mentioned three points are sufficient to show the ethical dimensions of the current journalistic profession. The quality of prepared content indicates the level of the journalists' work.

### **Defining ethical context in Poland, Romania and Spain**

There are many similarities and much more differences between the examined countries. An important part of the puzzle remains the social context. The general common point seems to be the democracy system as shaping the nationwide situation, but the countries differ in models of democracy. It also indicates the differences in media legislation, journalists' associations and instruments of media self-regulation.

We may talk about few institutions focused on the issues of journalism ethics. The most vibrant remain: Polish Journalists Association (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich), Journalists Association of Republic of Poland (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) and Catholic Journalists Association (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Katolickich). A lot of ethical codes exist in the sphere of professional media practice, thus some voices alarm that the level of professionalism is insufficient.



In Spain the practice of establishing the ethical codes is relatively new. What is important, Spain is one of the latest democratic countries in the process of setting up journalistic codes (Aznar, 2000, p. 61), although the oldest Spanish journalist association FAPE (Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España) has been operating since 1922. The late establishment of media codes is explained by José Vicente García-Santamaria. He claims that "it is not surprising that journalists believe that, in this environment, the ethical criteria are not applicable to real life, because this may make them look uncompetitive and lead them to lose their job" (García-Santamaria, 2010, p. 525).

Romania, another post-Communist country, in contrast to Poland, still builds its media professionalization (Vasilendiuc and Gross, 2012, p. 79). The collectivity of Romanian journalists is heterogeneous and represented both by unassociated professionals and unqualified individuals (Vasilendiuc, 2010, p. 13). The journalists' work has been influenced by an expansion of the Internet. The traditional journalism begins to rival with the so-called Google reporters. The journalism confronts the copy-paste type of work and office journalists that do not have a lot in common with traditional reporters (Vasilendiuc and Gross, 2012, p. 72). From the ethical point of view, the Internet affects the professionalization of media in a wrong direction.

It is easy to seek the explanation of the changing landscape of European journalism in the period of economic crisis as radical media economics. We see especially in Spain that the process of shrinking jobs

steadily continues. But it is not only a matter of the crisis. Few years before the shock on the stock, the model of financing Spanish TV has run out. Spanish public TV budget is now only partially supplied by the government. The rest of the money has to be made from advertisements. In fact, most of the TV propositions are dedicated to the average audience (Jaskiernia, 2006, pp. 163-164).

### **Discussion on authorship of media content**

As considered above, the quality of information is a result of the context of the nationwide media systems. We may also compare the attributes of information and find some significant differences. The first attribute that confirms the quality of information seems to be 'authorship'. A hypothetical emergence of a journalist at the end of the news supported by displaying their name and surname makes an impression of journalism credibility. The news is not an anonymous product, but they have a representation – a real journalist –, a person responsible for the content and its meaning. It means that all allegations to the media content may be sent directly to the author. Their visible name and surname helps the audience to follow regularly the specific voice and point of opinions.

Unfortunately, as the results of the content analysis show, the percentage of visible authorship is different in each country (Table 1). The highest percentage of signed media content is in Poland. Only 8% of the information in the examined Polish media on EU coverage has no author. Comparing it to Romania and Spain, we see an essential difference.

Romanian media content has 21% of media materials on the European Union matters that do not have any reference to the authors. Meanwhile, in Spain this attribute reaches 29%.

A huge disproportion between Polish-Romanian and Polish-Spanish data suggests the general inadequate situation between the Polish media, on the one hand, and Spanish and Romanian media, on the other hand. Otherwise, in the case of Romanian-Spanish level of materials without authors we see that the general rule of not mentioning the author identification is more associated to the latter country.

Focusing on each of the examined media segments we may add another important issue that complicates the puzzle. As we see from Table 1., the level of materials with the name of the author being unmentioned is always much more common in Spain and Romania than in Poland. On the other hand, it is impossible to claim that there is also media sector with a distinctive number of non-signed materials.

	Poland	Romania	Spain
Press	6	26	37
Radio	20	37	25
Television	0	0	26

Table 1.

Lack of authorship in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media content (EU coverage - 2013) in %

We see at least four relations between the examined attributes. First of all, the most impressive disproportion takes place in the TV sector. While in the Polish and Romanian media all materials have

the elements identifying the author, in the Spanish television *TVE1* the percentage of the examined content, that do not have the authors' names, takes almost a quarter of the issues (26%).

As already said, the lack of authorship does not allow the audience to follow regularly the content prepared by their favorite journalists. Moreover, it does not accelerate the journalists' efforts to specialize. From this point of view a key role has a journalist's question: why specialize in narrow research topics? As we see in the Spanish media system during the economic crisis, it is possible to answer that there was no positive motivation for the journalist's specialization. But where is the root of this problem? What makes the Spanish TV so involved in leaving the names and surnames or even initials of the authors off the content? As Spanish researchers suggest, lack of solidarity with the audience, negligence at work and fear of identification of the media content are very important as a result of specific journalists' work (Ángeles, Domínguez and Suárez, 2013).

The research on the EU issues covered by the Polish radio station shows an interesting case. According to the Polish data, the relatively high percentage of content with lack of authorship has radio station *RMF RM*. This tendency coincides with Romania, but there are some differences. First of all, the Polish and Romanian radio coverage on the EU has lower quality than the content of other segments. What is important, the distance between Polish radio and Polish press (14%) is bigger than between Romanian radio and press (10%). This inadequate

parallel shows that there is no universal ground to explain the similar phenomenon.

Another interesting thing is a lack of genre differences in TV and radio both in Poland (20%) and Romania (37%) and a small difference TV to radio in Spain (1%). As we suppose, these results show the cultivation of different models of journalistic work in TV and radio. In fact, the Polish and the Romanian ways of making TV content are different than in radio. There is something that might be called 'separation of segments'. The level of ethical dimensions have to be different.

Surprisingly, as we consider the segment with the highest number of unsigned materials, both Romanian radio and Spanish press (37%) are on top. It helps us to understand that such media companies as those that fulfill the charters of ethics and many of the ethical codes, simply need to face the effects of the crisis, and this has a significant impact on media authorship.

### **The importance of sources of information**

The second attribute following authorship is a clear presentation of the sources of information. At least two things are very important for this topic. First of all, we can talk about the transparency of the sources of information as a procedure of usage of many sources. If the news does not have at least two sources of information, the quality of media news decreases. Checking the news in a second, third and fourth independent source of information helps to realize the unreachable demand in objectivity (Lichtenberg, 2000, pp. 249-252). Besides, using more

than only one source of information is closer to compliance with the ethical standard of taking into account many points of view or opposite opinions about the facts.

	0 sources	1 source	2 sources	3 and more sources
Poland	22	23	35	20
Press	10	10	19	61
Radio	50	40	10	0
Television	6	19	75	0
Romania	32	47	17	4
Press	17	57	20	6
Radio	25	48	21	6
Television	55	35	10	0
Spain	28	12	0	0
Press	29	37	0	0
Radio	13	0	0	0
Television	43	0	0	0
In general	28	27	17	8
Press	19	35	13	22
Radio	29	29	10	2
Television	35	18	28	0

Table 2.

Sources of information in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media content (EU coverage 2013) in %

It is significant to notice (Table 2) that in the examined countries such a huge percentage of media content does not expose the source of information (28%). Neither Polish nor Romanian and Spanish

media remain free of tendency of manipulation of the sources of information. This fact means that a significant part of information about the European Union does not exclude the general risk of manipulation. When we compare the results, we can see that the aggregative percentage of media without exposition of at least one source of information remains relatively different (Poland 22%, Romania 32%, Spain 28%). The Polish-Spanish comparison achieves 6% of difference. Similarly, the Polish-Romania comparison gets 10% and Spanish-Romanian 4%. It shows that relatively similar position of sources of information takes place in Romania and Spain or Poland and Spain rather than Poland and Romania. When we consider that Poland and Romania belong to the post-communist countries, it seems that the shared heritage and a piece of common history cannot be a suitable explanation of this phenomenon.

Without doubt the lowest level of following the ethical rules about the diversity of sources of information represents the radio and television sector. The data show that in the press the percentage of materials without sources is 19%, while in radio (29%) and in television (35%) it is much higher.

Furthermore, in the type of media perspective we can see that in Poland the press and TV have in common a general basic level of information without exposed sources (6-10%). A similar case takes place in the Romanian press and radio station (17-25%), whereas in Spain there is no adequate case and the distinction is at least 16%. It is a good argument for facing the Spanish media system as much more

heterogeneous in media praxis than the Polish or Romanian one. In fact, we can presume a relatively strong level of universal ethical habits of Polish and Romanian journalists compared to the situation in Spain.

### Diversity of journalistic genres

In the professional media ethics, the diversity of sources of information is always supported by the variety of forms of media content. There is a correlation between the type of media content (information or opinion) and the journalistic genres. Rules, such as strict separation of opinion and information, help to understand the differences between these matters. If there is a plurality in the use of journalistic genres, ratio of opinions to the facts depends on the nature of nationwide journalism. This part of the chapter shows that the nature of journalism creates a dominance of one of two perspectives: primacy of the facts or primacy of the opinions.

	Poland			Romania			Spain		
	press	radio	TV	press	radio	TV	press	radio	TV
information									
news	44,29	80	64,71	77,12	16,47	10,34	62,07	84,4	77,57
reports	17,14	20	23,53	0,00	83,53	89,66	5,17	0,00	0,00
inter-views	10,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	2,87	2,15	0,00
informa-tion genres in media sectors	71,43	100	88,24	77,12	100	100	70,11	86,55	77,57



informa- -tion genres in total	86,56			92,37			78,08		
opinion									
chroni- cles	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	12,64	10,75	18,18
reviews	2,86	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
opinion articles	22,86	0,00	0,00	18,07	0,00	0,00	12,07	0,00	0,00
reporta- ges	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,57	2,68	4,24
editori- als	2,86	0,00	5,88	4,81	0,00	0,00	4,6	0,00	0,00
cartoon s	0,00	0,00	5,88	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
opinion genres in media sectors	28,58	0,00	11,76	22,88	0,00	0,00	29,88	13,43	22,42
opinion genres in total	13,45			7,63			21,91		

Table 3. Genres in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media content (EU coverage 2013) in %

As observed in Table 3, the general ratio of information to opinion shows the dominance of information genres. In Poland this ratio is 86,55% of information to 13,45% of opinions, in Romania it is 92,37% to 7,63% and in Spain 78,08% to 21,91%. The detailed structure of the genres, in particular prevailing ratio of information to opinions helps to answer for such questions as: does the journalistic work use many of the possible genres to translate and show the audience the complexity of the reported world?; does the lack of some journalistic genres narrow the cognitive perspective of the audience to the reported problems?

The comparative perspective of the press titles proves that Polish and Spanish media coverage of the European Union issues is more diverse than the coverage of the Romanian media. It is significant that both Poland and Spain contain 3 different kinds of information genres and 6-7 kinds of opinion ones. At the same time, Romanian media deliver content with 2 opinion materials. This difference leads to two conclusions. According to the data, all Romanian news about the European Union was strictly presented as information. The EU issues could not be focused on showing the Romanian statement on Europe. But only inform about the EU activities. This seems not to support such phenomena as tabloidization or domination of entertainment in media content.

Moreover, the lack of opinion genres binds the opinions as part of information. As we know, this mix is treated as unacceptable for the professional journalism ethics. So is it possible to add the opinion into information? The answer is "yes". Unfortunately, it implies a narrow landscape of the discussed problems. In general, limited vision of the facts does not serve the development of the democratic standards of journalism.

We have to remember that even if the results of Polish and Romanian media are similar to general Spanish results they cannot be treated in the same way. Radio formula indicates shorter forms of news than TV or press. Of course the presented results in the three countries are different. Although we see some similarities between Polish and Romanian media, there is an essential difference compared to

Spain. It shows that the examined Spanish radio works in the formula that can provide a broad view of the reported world. On the other hand, we see, especially in Polish radio and Romanian radio and television, that the limit of journalistic genres narrows the perspective of the audience to the reported problems.

	RO TV	ES radio	RO radio	PL radio	ES TV	RO press	PL TV	ES press	PL press
news	0	84, 40	0	80	77, 57	77, 12	64, 71	62, 07	44, 29
news as dominant genre	70,02								
reports	89, 66	0	83, 53	0	0	0	0	0	0
reports as dominant genre	86,60								

Table 4.

Dominant genres in Polish, Romanian and Spanish media content on EU coverage in %  
(RO – Romania, ES – Spain, PL - Poland)

We see the dominance of news in 7 and the domination of reports in 2 of the 9 examined media. The average number of the dominant genre is 78,30% (news take 70,02% and reports take 86,60%) and shows a strongly homogenous model of showing the facts via media. In fact, as Table 2 shows many of these materials (28%) do not evidence their sources of information, which shows that the professional

standards of the journalistic ethics are not implemented.

## **Conclusion**

Starting from the data collected from the content analysis of the EU coverage in three European countries, I presented some insights into the journalistic work in Poland, Romania and Spain. Thanks to the results of the journalists' work, we may see the final effect of their activity, and in the future we may also identify some of the weaknesses of this job, or just challenges for the journalists and journalistic associations that need to be faced. So what are the main media ethics challenges for the journalistic ethics?

The current conditions of media lead to the conclusion that the guiding principles of the professional ethics, such as strong documentation of the cases (evidence of the sources of information), separation of opinion from the information, and of course the diversity of genres that provide the multi-aspect coverage of the problem, are ignored.

For the Spanish journalists it is important to take into consideration the general right of the audience to know who the author of the media content is. Overall, the journalists present a low regime of full description of the reality. Far too much of media content is based only on one source of information. The Romanian journalists face the separation of facts and opinions. It is almost unbelievable that 83,43% of the examined content of Romanian media relates to news and reports, while the opinions are only presented in the press. The comparison shows that

generally the best situation takes place in Poland. The problem is a relative small number of journalistic genres used in the radio station, which does not provide complex coverage of the world matters.

We can conclude that the quality of journalism faces different problems in Poland, Romania and Spain; however, the general trends do not help in the implementation of the ethical principles.

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