

Version 2 - original submission to the journal with
revisions after peer review, accepted by the editor

“We Are Not Fools”: Online News Commentators’ Perceptions of Real and Ideal Journalism

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Abstract

Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern European countries face an increasing threat to their media pluralism and democracies after a lot of media corporations fell in the hands of local owners. The region is plagued by “mini-Murdochs,” and Bulgaria is a case in point. This study investigates a subset of Bulgarian online newspaper readers’ perceptions of the state of journalism. The article presents the results from a qualitative analysis of 1,583 comments about the media war between the country’s biggest press groups. It focuses on 178 comments that discuss the role of journalists. Readers differentiate between “ideal journalism” and “real journalism.” The former is based on an idealized view of journalists as detached watchdogs, whereas the latter depicts a dire picture of journalists as manipulative servants of their owners. The virtual space is a vibrant arena for democratic discussions and can also potentially serve as an accountability tool for journalists. A reconceptualization of Habermas’s public sphere is needed if we are to more clearly understand how vibrant online spaces contribute to democracy even if they fall short of his normative ideal.

Keywords

Eastern Europe, journalism, media ownership, “mini-Murdochs,” reader opinion, online comments

On July 11, 2014, Bulgarians woke up to the news that \$136 million have disappeared from the fourth biggest lender—Corporate Commercial Bank. The news spread quickly around the world and the *New York Times*¹ reported that the Bulgarian Central Bank had accused the biggest shareholder Tsvetan Vasilev of taking the money from the bank’s vaults in sacks. From one of the country’s most respected and affluent businessmen, Vasilev turned overnight into an alleged criminal wanted by Interpol. The bank was shut down and lenders were denied access to their deposits. The international press¹ also picked up on the fact that the bank’s surprising ordeal started after the local news outlets reported on a feud between Vasilev and Delyan Peevski, a media mogul and member of parliament (MP). “Mr. Peevski accused Mr. Vasilev of hiring people to kill him, and Mr. Vasilev has made similar accusations.”¹ Prior to this, they were close allies. The “Murdoch of the East,”² Peevski was the behind-the-scenes owner of the biggest press group (officially headed by his mother). His company was

allegedly financed by Vasilev and his bank, and PM Boyko Borisov's first government was accused of "indirectly subsidising" it by depositing public funds in the bank.³

What sounds like a film scenario is a logical development in a country where politicians, media owners, and businessmen have increasingly become interlocked in "an informal power alliance."² The demise of communism in Central and Eastern Europe brought about an influx of foreign investment and liberalization, but the global financial crisis in 2007–2008 led to a worrying development—investors started withdrawing and a lot of big media fell in the hands of politicians or businessmen with strong political agendas (Hume 2011; Štětka 2012). As Štětka² points out, Central and Eastern European countries are now "plagued by their own mini-Murdochs—and in these more fragile democracies, they represent an even bigger threat." Bulgaria is one of the most extreme examples because the feud between Vasilev and Peevski was only the tip of the iceberg in a long-running war for political and economic power between the two biggest press corporations—Peevski's New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG) and his rivals' (also well-known local businessmen) Media Group Bulgaria (MGB). The war was led on the pages of their newspapers and on TV, and politicians and the judicial system were implicated in it via corruption allegations and lawsuits.

These regional processes of "Berlusconization" (Coman 2010: 58) went hand-in-hand with an important global trend—the advent of the Internet and social media, which brought about "unprecedented structural changes" in journalism as a profession (Weaver and Wilnat 2012: 1). The implications are multifold—from a blurring of the line between media "professionals" and their audiences to a rethinking of journalistic professionalism and speculations about the future/end of journalism. In the Bulgarian context, these interlinked developments present us with a unique opportunity to investigate audiences' views of the state of journalism as well as the "ideals" they believe in. This is precisely what this study will do by qualitatively analyzing the unsolicited views of a subset of online readers about the media war as posted in 1,583 comments on newspapers' websites. It will give us an insight into an underresearched context (a new Eastern European democracy) where online readers appear to be much more active than readers in established democracies (Richardson and Stanyer 2011) or non-democratic countries. Moreover, while on one hand, "scholars have been extensively and continuously tracking what journalists themselves think about their role in society" (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014: 434), and on the other hand, online comments have been studied from different angles (e.g., McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011; Nielsen 2014; Papacharissi 2004), the public's views on journalism have rarely been researched. When they have, they were usually solicited by surveys and questionnaires with predetermined notions/concepts (e.g., Chung 2009; Lowrey and Anderson 2005). Yet, as van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014: 447) argue, it is important to research audiences' perceptions now more than ever because of "the shifting power relations between (what used to be) senders and receivers in the current media environment." Moreover, readers are important stakeholders in the debate about what journalistic professionalism entails if journalism's main function is to serve the public interest. The project also allows us to revisit Habermas's notion of the public sphere—while online boards have a deliberative democratic potential, most studies demonstrate that this potential is not realized (Dahlberg 2001; Papacharissi 2002;

Richardson and Stanyer 2011). This study adds further weight to a growing body of research that calls for a reconceptualization of Habermas's normative ideal.

What Is Journalism? Audiences' Views

The conceptualization of journalism as a profession recently regained momentum due to the challenges posed by the “digital revolution” and the rapid advent of “citizen” journalists. Most of our knowledge of journalistic professionalism is based on studies with journalists—predominantly surveys (albeit with categories predetermined by academics) indicating what their role perceptions are. Thus, *The Worlds of Journalism* (2014) study, aimed at mapping “journalism's cultures” in twenty-one countries, shows that journalists play four roles: (1) detached watchdogs, (2) populist disseminators, (3) opportunist facilitators, and (4) critical change agents. It argues that there is a “global primacy of role perceptions” of “detachment and non-involvement,” being a watchdog of government and providing political information (Hanitzsch et al. 2011: 286). This grand claim can hardly be made about Bulgaria, however, because only 14 percent of Bulgarian journalists fall into the “detached watchdog” category; 35 percent see themselves as populist disseminators, 32 percent as critical change agents, and 19 percent as opportunist facilitators (Worlds of Journalism 2014). Moreover, Curry (1990 as quoted in Örnebring 2009) and Wolfe (2005 as quoted in Örnebring 2009) claim that although there is a clear sense of professionalism among Eastern European journalists, it is based on very different values from the ones their Western colleagues cherish. Lauk (2009: 71) explains that despite efforts to export the Anglo-American model in Central and Eastern Europe, “there are no successful cases of replacing the Communist model with a ‘western’ one.” Similarly, Weaver and Wilnat's (2012: 545) edited volume, which presents the results of surveys with twenty-nine thousand journalists from thirty-one countries, shows that there is “little evidence of a trend toward a global journalism culture,” because “journalistic values and norms depend heavily on social, political, and cultural contexts.” The reports produced as part of the “Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe” project (2009–2013) and Coman's (2004, 2010) studies in neighboring Romania give further weight to these claims.

While “scholars have been extensively and continuously tracking what journalists themselves think about their role in society” (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014: 434), “research on audience perceptions and demands of news journalism is scarce and fragmented.” This is surprising, given that the normative justification of journalistic professionalism is often based on the public interest notion. In their representative survey in the Netherlands, van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) demonstrate that audiences' perceptions of journalism are not fundamentally different from the ones shared by journalists. Similarly, Lowrey and Anderson's (2005) U.S. respondents “have a high opinion of journalism as an occupation.” Chung (2009) reveals a mismatch between online community newspaper readers' views on perceived roles and journalists' perceptions in representative surveys. The findings are really

interesting indeed because they run counter to popular claims that the audience is “uninterested and hedonistic” (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014: 447). Nonetheless, all these studies are based on quantitative surveys with predetermined questions. They offer audiences’ views of existing and predefined (by journalists and academics) roles and values. However, the online space presents a unique opportunity for us—the ability to “observe” and analyze naturally occurring public conversations between a subset of audience members and to explore their unsolicited views. This is exactly what this article aims to do.

Why Online Comments?

Lots of recent studies (see below) use online comments as the object of their analysis. Key topics explored are the potential for democratic deliberation, interactivity, participatory journalism, and audience empowerment as well as ethical issues— anonymity, (in)civility, bigotry, and so forth. Why is it important to study online comments? First, they are a key interactive feature that illustrates the changing relationship between news producers and audiences—the potential for participatory journalism and audience empowerment. They also offer journalists “new ways of knowing about their audiences” (MacGregor 2007: 280). Second, at least in theory, like the letters-to-the-editor sections, online boards provide arenas for “public discussion by regular citizens” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002: 69), and as such have a deliberative democratic potential (Dahlberg 2001; Papacharissi 2002; Richardson and Stanyer 2011). As Eveland et al. (2011: 1089) explain, “deliberative theory suggests that individuals should come together to share information and consider one another’s opinions on the important political issues of the day—and that this will improve the practice of democracy.” The quality of argumentation is of paramount importance—“a process whereby claims are attacked and defended and differences of opinion resolved” (Richardson and Stanyer 2011: 986). Most empirical investigations (e.g., Bergström 2008; Richardson and Stanyer 2011) suggest that this potential is not realized precisely because of the low quality of argumentation. Instead of extending the public sphere or leading to the development of a virtual one (Dahlberg 2001), online boards often turn into “a place where unashamed bigotry is all too easy to find” (Washington as quoted in Santana 2014: 20). Studies (Hlavach and Freivogel 2011; McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011; Reader 2012; Santana 2014) explore the role anonymity plays. Santana (2014: 28) claims that “there is a dramatic improvement in the level of civility in online conversations when anonymity is removed,” but he also warns that banning anonymous comments may have adverse implications such as a reduction in the number of participants and the range of views. Although incivility is clearly a hindrance (Papacharissi 2004), McCluskey and Hmielowski’s (2011) study shows that anonymity encourages wider participation. Proponents of anonymity argue that it “allows people to speak truth to powerful institutions” and banning it will not curb the underlying attitudes that lead to incivility, racism, or bigotry (Reader 2012).

Overall, most investigations based closely on Habermas's normative ideal reach pessimistic conclusions. This has led some scholars to argue for a move away from deliberation, because "the deliberative framing of political conversation research can lead to unrealistic expectations about the function of political conversation" (Eveland et al. 2011: 1086). Papacharissi (2002) and Loke (2013) offer a more nuanced approach. They differentiate between the public sphere and the public space. Loke (2013: 184) argues that comment sections should be seen as "a new public space and should not be confused as the new public sphere." A public sphere can consist of different public spaces. The difference is that while "a virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy" (Papacharissi 2002: 11).

This is the main theoretical premise this article is built on—though not a fully fledged investigation of the deliberative democratic potential of online comments (conducted as part of the wider study—see Slavtcheva-Petkova 2015), it will offer a useful account of virtual discussions about journalism. As Dahlgren (2005: 160) puts it,

while it is important to keep a clear perspective and not exaggerate the extent of the activities or their impact, it would also be foolish to underestimate what seems to be a major development in the contemporary history of Western democracy.

This article will contribute to this body of literature in four ways. First, it is narrowly focused on readers' views of journalism. Second, unlike most studies that utilize predominantly quantitative research frameworks and rely on academics'/journalists' preconceived views and ideals, comments are analyzed in an open-ended qualitative way by adopting a grounded theory approach. Third, the project also shows some scope for optimism. Online readers in our sample seem much more active than readers in established democracies. Richardson and Stanyer (2011) found on average nineteen comments per article in a study of U.K. newspapers, versus thirty per article in my Bulgarian sample. The views they express about journalism show that these discussion spaces can be vibrant arenas for democratic debate. Finally, it will focus on a slightly different context from the ones frequently explored—an Eastern European new democracy.

As Ruiz et al. (2011: 482) point out, "the cultural context is relevant to the democratic qualities of the debates." While sharing the fundamental values of democracy, democracies in transition experience teething problems. The transition from communism to democracy "has been far from smooth" (Örnebring 2009: 7). As already indicated, there is not much evidence of the "global primacy of role perceptions that are characterised by detachment and non-involvement" in the Bulgarian case (Hanitzsch et al. 2011: 286). Moreover, even in the early years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Jakubowicz (1998/1999: 27) reported a high level of distrust in journalists in Central and Eastern Europe due to the fact that "lip service is paid to one set of concepts as regards the media and journalism, while quite different ones are applied in practice." Coman's (2004, 2010) more recent studies in Romania show similar trends. Increasingly academics started using the terms *Italianization* or

Mediterraneanization to describe the situation in post-communist countries (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012; Jakubowicz & Sükösd 2008).

“Plagued by Mini-Murdochs”—Journalism in Eastern and Central Europe in the Context of the Bulgarian Media Wars

Eastern and Central European countries have gone through a rapid period of political and economic transformation in the last twenty years. Communist regimes were replaced by democracies and most countries “swapped” the Soviet sphere of influence and the Warsaw Pact with membership in the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As Metyková and Císarová (2009: 721) point out, “within a relatively short period of time privately owned media and public service broadcasting were established in these countries.” Foreign investors bought media companies or established new ones. However, the global financial crisis brought about a worrying regional trend—the withdrawal of foreign owners and appropriation of companies by “local entrepreneurs who are interested in harvesting the political potential of these now-established media venues” (Hume 2011: 6). Štětka (2012: 441) argues that the recession was not the only reason why foreign investors withdrew. Another key factor is “the increasing inability to compete in an environment ruled by other-than-market rules” due to “the widespread abuse of power” and “the close intertwining of oligarchs and political power”(as pointed out by the CEO of WAZ Bodo Hombach). As a result, the region is now “plagued by their own mini-Murdochs—and in these more fragile democracies, they represent an even bigger threat.”² According to Hombach, oligarchs are buying local media “not in order to win money” but “in order to exert political influence” to “promote business or political interests” (Štětka 2012: 441).

Bulgaria is a typical example of these worrying developments. The country’s free press rankings considerably dropped and it is now classified as “partly free.”³ Most newspapers are owned by two media groups—MGB, which was part of the German newspaper group WAZ till 2010 but then fell in the hands of local owners, and NBMG.² Thirty-five-year-old MP Delyan Peevski was the “de facto owner” of the latter until a few months ago. The corporation is allegedly related to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms—established as “a party of the Turkish ethnic minority” (Tabakova 2014). It has “a history of strongly supporting whichever party was in power” and its owner is one of the most controversial figures—“practically running” his mother’s newspapers “by deciding on front page articles and editorial policy” (Štětka 2012: 448). Although similar intertwining of oligarchs and political power is evident in other countries in the region, Bulgaria and Romania exemplify “the crudest cases of political instrumentalization” (Štětka 2012: 448).

Peevski’s political career has not gone unnoticed even in Western media. Although still a twenty-one-year-old student, he was appointed parliamentary secretary to the minister of transport as well as chair of the Board of Directors of the biggest port in Bulgaria. Then at 25, he became a deputy minister.⁵ Peevski has been an elected MP from the Movement for Rights and Freedom since 2009. Euractiv⁶ describes him “as a

symbol of the shady power brokerage that has impoverished Bulgarians and ruined the country's reputation." Freedom House (2014) notes that "opaque collusion between media owners and political leaders came to the fore in June 2013 when the Socialist-led ruling coalition" appointed Peevski as head of the State Agency for National Security [AQ10]. His appointment was reversed because it led to a mass wave of street protests, which went on for months "amid deep public frustration with corruption in business, the media, and politics."² One of Peevski's closest allies and the person who allegedly financed his media group was banker Tsvetan Vasilev. A former right-wing government was accused of "indirectly subsidising" Peevski's media group through deposits by state entities in Vasilev's bank in exchange for political support by Peevski's newspapers. The former allies recently became public enemies. News reports implicated the banker's name in an alleged murder plot against the MP and soon after that his bank was closed down and fraud proceedings against him were initiated. Although it is not clear how and why Peevski and Vasilev became enemies, Peevski himself explained that the rift erupted when he refused to support Vasilev's political ambitions to become Prime Minister, while sources close to the banker claim that it all started when companies associated with Peevski defaulted on their loan payments.⁵

This saga was preceded by another long-running feud between Peevski's media holding and the other major player on the market—MGB. In WAZ's hands, the corporation owned the major newspapers—close to the legally allowed maximum market share with speculations about media monopoly (von Dohnanyi 2003). However, as soon as the new owners took over, an open feud between the press groups ensued. MGB's owners were very high-profile figures—Ognian Donev, CEO of Bulgaria's biggest pharmaceutical company, and Lyubomir Pavlov, a former banker and politician (Langley 2013). The dominating speculation was that the war started because Peevski wanted to buy MGB but was turned down by WAZ. Almost as soon as Pavlov and Donev took over, they were charged with fraud and money laundering. The war was openly led on the pages of their newspapers and on TV. Numerous articles were published about corruption practices and undue political influence. One of the culminating events was when TV presenter Nikolay Barekov tore to pieces an issue of *Trud* live on air in 2012. His show was aired by TV7—a company owned by NBMG. Barekov called the newspaper a rug and said that it would soon cease to exist.⁶ Barekov is a very controversial journalist who subsequently formed a political party in 2013, allegedly financed by Vasilev. These negative developments prompted commentators to argue that "media freedom and pluralism" are in 'jeopardy.'² Readers were constantly exposed to stories about the rival company/owners as well as articles vindicating their own proprietors. Although a few recent cross-national studies (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Štětka 2012) have included interviews with Bulgarian journalists on different issues, readers' views have not really been researched. It will be interesting, however, to find out how those readers who take part as online commentators in active, digitally enabled public discussions around journalism

interpret these largely negative developments and what role they think journalists (should) play in their societies:

Research Question 1: What are Bulgarian online commentators' views on the current state of journalism and how do they define "ideal" journalism?

Research Question 2: To what extent do these online conversations function as an arena for democratic deliberation?

Method

This is a mixed-methods study but the results presented come mainly from the qualitative analysis. The study combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis. The initial sample consisted of the four biggest-selling national dailies owned by NBMG and MGB—*Telegraph*, *Monitor*, *Trud*, and *24 chasa*. *Telegraph* is a very cheap tabloid currently with the highest circulation in the country. *Trud* and *24 Chasa* are second and third in circulation. They are classified as "hybrid tabloids"—"they combine and integrate elements of both tabloids and quality press, of serious and popular, even scandalous reporting" but they identify themselves as serious, quality newspapers (Tabakova 2008). *Monitor* is the quality version of *Telegraph* but again defined as a hybrid tabloid. Our original intention was to download and analyze all articles and the comments underneath containing the names of the (alleged) owners (and associates) of the two groups—banker Vasilev, MP Peevski and his mother Irena Krasteva who officially heads NBMG as well as MGB's owners Pavlov and Donev. However, only MGB's newspapers allow readers to post comments. *Telegraph* has a Web site but it contains only a screenshot of the print edition, while *Monitor* posts stories online but no comments are allowed. To post comments in *24 Chasa* and *Trud*, users have to either register (only email addresses are required) or log in via Facebook. Verification emails are not sent out and there is no reference to editorial policies. All user names were recorded in our database but they are not used in the article to prevent identification. Therefore, the final sample consists only of comments published in *24 chasa* and *Trud*. This is a limitation of the study that could not be avoided because it is a reflection of the actual situation. It also gives us an indication about the level of media freedom and potential audience empowerment. Although the wider issue the article address is how the audience perceive the real and ideal role of journalism, it is important to underline that the empirical evidence analyzed here is not representative of the Bulgarian population as a whole. The material analyzed expresses the views of a particular audience—those online readers of a few critically important Bulgarian national newspapers who have shown an interest in that topic and publicly expressed their views. While not necessarily indicative of the wider population's views, this active and engaged minority takes part in a public and in principle open and participatory debate around the real and ideal role of journalism in Bulgaria.

Because of the central role of ownership in connecting media and politics in Bulgaria, the data collection focused on discussions around 387 articles published with owners' names (keywords) mentioned in them. The articles cover the period between December 2010 and May 2013—when Pavlov and Donev owned MGB. The comments were retrieved from the Web sites between October 2013 and May 2014. The list of hyperlinks with all articles was downloaded in October 2013 and the comments were subsequently analyzed directly from the websites. Each comment was coded in Bulgarian and then translated into English and included into an SPSS/NVivo database. That left us with 5,305 comments. All articles were coded in SPSS and after the identification of main themes, the sample was further reduced to those comments explicitly discussing the media war—1583. They were subsequently coded quantitatively and then analyzed thematically in nVIVO. The coding frames for the quantitative analysis and all nodes/categories used as part of the qualitative analysis are available on request.

Given the focus of this article, comments that contained the words “journalism,” “journalist(s),” or “journalistic” were then analyzed qualitatively in a third stage with the aim of identifying common themes and descriptions of audiences' perceptions of journalism and the role journalists (should) play in society. This project is of a qualitative nature and it adopts a grounded theory approach. Comments were analyzed in an open-ended way: Rather than starting with preconceived ideas of what readers' definition(s) of journalism might be, emerging themes were identified via the constant comparison method and then subsequently refined (initial and focused coding) before reaching conclusions on what readers' definitions actually are (Fielding 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The main analytical themes in relation to the research questions are presented in the next section. Nodes were created in NVivo and every new comment was either coded under an existing node (emerging from the analysis of previous comments) or a new node was added. There were overlaps between the nodes/categories and some were later grouped into broader categories. For example, there were considerable overlaps between readers discussing “real” and “ideal” journalism in their online comments.

This three-stage process allowed for an initial screening and quantification based on a coding schedule adapted from previous research (Richardson 2008; Richardson and Stanyer 2011), followed by an in-depth qualitative thematic analysis based on a grounded theory approach. Nine percent of the quantitative sample was re-coded by a second researcher.⁷ The qualitative categories were refined after presenting the data at academic conferences and consulting researchers working on similar projects. Negative case analysis was used where relevant. This is a standard procedure in qualitative analysis—it “involves searching for and discussing elements of the data that do not support or appear to contradict patterns or explanations that are emerging from data analysis.”⁸

“Real Journalism” versus “Ideal Journalism”: Online Commentators’ Verdicts

The words “journalism,” “journalist(s),” and/or “journalistic” were used in 178 comments—about 11 percent of the sample. The analysis of these comments will be presented in this section. Four main topics in the articles attracted the majority of comments. First, more than a third (35.4 percent) were discussing the scandal triggered by TV presenter Nikolay Barekov who tore to pieces an issue of *Trud* live on air. Second, a quarter (26.4 percent) were about events initiated by MGB’s owner Pavlov (nickname “Papkata”) in an attempt to clear his reputation after money laundering and fraud charges were pressed against him and his partner as well as a series of reports about his property portfolio abroad were published. The third topic (14 percent) was about the distribution war between the press groups. A company affiliated to NBMG owned the distribution chain and a scandal erupted with allegations about missed payments and disruptions in the distribution of rival titles. Finally, 6.2 percent of comments were about an article in the German newspaper *Die Welt* about the state of the Bulgarian media market.

What are online commentators’ definitions of journalism? Three broad categories were identified with considerable overlaps between them. Two-thirds describe “real journalism” or the reality of journalism; 25 percent depict “ideal journalism,” what journalism should be, and 8.6 percent explicitly talk about freedom of expression.

Real Journalism

A few sub-themes prevail in the “real journalism” category—again with considerable overlaps between them. Nearly half of all commentators (43.4 percent) who describe the current state of journalism in Bulgaria claim the newspaper articles are “pre-ordered” or “pre-paid” by somebody and/or that journalists themselves pose as “pretend readers” and publish comments. A similar phenomenon has been observed in other contexts—Chinese commentators refer to the “fifty cent party,”⁹ posters who allegedly receive 50 cents per positive comment they write about government policies. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate whether there is evidence to support these allegations but it is an interesting issue worth exploring in future research. A significant number of online commentators engage in discussions that promote conspiracy theories—often linked with allegations about corruption practices such as claims that the comments are preordered by a specific individual or people (most commonly a media owner) or that other online commentators are on payroll in a rival group¹⁰:

Reader 1: There can hardly be a bigger humiliation for a journalist than to be forced to pretend he is a reader, write comments under his own article and then publish them by hiding the negative ones. This is what you call freedom of expression?

Reader 2: If somebody shows me even a single journalist who cannot be bribed and even one independent medium, this person will get a Nobel prize from me for invention. Journalists have been and will always be dependent on someone or something.

Reader 3: Bulgarian journalists will sell their mother's milk for money and power!!! What a shame!!!

Reader 4: Sue each other, why don't you? Everyone has this right, but in the meantime nothing is getting better. Our medicines are still expensive so that Diliana Grozdanova (Pavlov's wife) can sunbathe on the Riviera and some here are on payroll defending oligarchs for a few silver coins. Or copper coins?

Reader 5: When Peevski's writers on payroll have difficulty digesting the facts and have nothing to say in response, they try to divert attention. The truth is there is media monopoly and its inspirers and organizers are Peevski and his mother with the financial support of Corporate Commercial Bank (until recently a partner in their firm).

Online commentators often mention specific people they feel are behind the conspiracy plots and/or corruption practices—from media moguls to high-profile politicians. The level of argumentation is not particularly high. Commentators often engage with each other but though there are instances in which they tackle ideas and views previously expressed, very often these dialogues include accusations of dependency as well as occasional insults. Any burgeoning discussion is almost immediately stifled by corruption allegations.

Similarly damning are 39 percent of the comments in which readers argue that Bulgarian journalism is manipulative with examples of stories in which the "truth"/"reality" is distorted:

Reader 6: Mr journalists, don't mislead people through interviews with your colleagues. It's clear that they will reprimand Barekov's deed in front of the mass reader but they all say privately that he was right to expose the lies. Have you never thought of tearing a paper up when you come across blatant lies?

Reader 7: Until the media are in the hands of oligarchs who use them for personal gain, journalism will be yellow press, flash drives (a common practice is for journalists to receive flash drives with information from anonymous sources) and articles unsupported by evidence with lots of assumptions and libellous statements.

Reader 8: The two papers fill their pages with foreign words, write God with a small g, publish photos of nuns dressed as prostitutes. They write against doctors, lawyers, etc. but wouldn't allow you to criticise their own mediocrity. I'm glad that journalists showed their real face—mediocre, malicious, petty and illiterate.

Reader 9: Misunderstood journalism! When did objectivity and the search for impartiality disappear? I am tired of reading manipulative articles, twisting the truth to serve the respective editorial office. This is not journalism. This is an attack over freedom of

expression forced to trade with its own body to please the sick ambitions of those who have enough money to buy it.

Again similar issues are discussed—many online commentators think that articles are manipulative and they identify specific practices as well as a potential cause: media ownership. This reality is seen as disappointing because they compare current practices with idealized views of what journalism should be about—objectivity and the search for impartiality. The last comment discusses the state of current/“real” journalism and contains a definition of “ideal” journalism. A small minority goes even further—they compare the quality of journalism with the quality of democracy. Most claim that the state of journalism is a direct reflection of the poor quality of democracy and the fact that oligarchs are allowed to be as powerful:

Reader 10: Russians call their democracy демократия. Our journalism is the same as our political life. Radical right-wing and left-wing politics, radical right-wing and left-wing journalism. Such is Bulgaria’s демократия.

Reader 11: I’ve had enough of oligarchs such as Papkata and Donev. I will personally stop reading *24 Chasa* and *Trud* because true journalism in Bulgaria passed away.

Reader 12: Let us not forget that the so-called fourth estate with its readiness to sell itself, its fruitlessness, greed, etc. (whatever negative I say, I won’t be mistaken) is to blame for the swamp our society has delved deep into with the total exchange of values.

Most online commentators’ verdict on the quality of democracy and journalism in Bulgaria is damning. The media war has led to an intended consequence—“oligarchs” have come more prominently into the limelight. The comparison between Bulgaria and other “civilised” countries (as opposed to Russia) is often present—Bulgaria is always described as inferior and many online commentators make references to countries in Europe and/or the European Union as being “superior”/“civilised.” Moreover, Reader 12 claims that journalists are to be blame for the dire state of society. Yet again the reality of journalism is often depicted in contrast to what “ideal” journalism should be. In most online commentators’ eyes, journalists are not holding the powerful into account and they are therefore (partially) to blame for the dire state of democracy. Clearly, Bulgarian journalists do not live up to the idealized perceptions this subset of readers has of journalists in “civilised” countries.

“Ideal Journalism”

A quarter of comments can be classified as discussing “ideal” journalism. Different issues are mentioned—from professional standards, values, and norms such as objectivity and ethical standards to serving the public interest and more generic references to “normal,” “true,” or western journalism:

Reader 13: The publication is rubbish—couldn't you just both sides like they do in normal journalism—it's a pity!

Reader 14: Journalists are to blame. When I say journalists are mean the real ones who do not toady to the powerful. Good luck to the brave ones!

Reader 15: A real journalist is always led by the PUBLIC INTEREST! Whatever s/he does, no matter what preferences s/he has, the PUBLIC INTEREST has to be defended in the end.

Reader 16: It's not the journalists' job to be watchdogs of society at any cost! This can be a main task for a rascal who keeps waving a journalism flag and critiques those in power only to come into it (when the criticised fall down). The task of REAL JOURNALISM, you bedpan, IS TO SERVE THE PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST!

Reader 17: It's really unbelievable that *24 Chasa* thinks its readers are so silly that they believe the above opinion is some sort of journalism. And none of us cares about the intrigues in your media groups. Your job is to cover the news and not to create them through your internal intrigues.

As evident, definitions of “ideal” journalism revolve around what is sometimes seen as “western” principles—balance and objective coverage, journalism as the “fourth estate” and journalists as watchdogs of society as well as the public interest. This is an interesting finding because while Hanitzsch et al. (2011: 286) argue that there is a “global primacy of role perceptions that are characterized by detachment and non-involvement,” being a watchdog of government and providing political information, only 14 percent of Bulgarian journalists share these values. Therefore, it appears as if Bulgarian readers in this sample have different expectations about the role journalists should play in their society than the ones journalists themselves share. This gap explains to an extent commentators' negativity toward Bulgarian journalism and journalists. However, Reader 16 elaborates by arguing that serving the public interest is different from being a watchdog. Unfortunately, none of the subsequent comments engage with this view so the potential for fruitful discussion is not realized.

Freedom of expression

Most of the comments in this category are very pessimistic. Online commentators discuss what they perceive as journalists' and owners' hypocrisy—the fact that although they make big claims about freedom of expression, there does not seem to be real freedom of expression in their own editions due to the controversial role oligarchs play. Some go as far as to say that because of that, there is no real freedom of expression in Bulgaria:

Reader 18: The article is a good example of how journalists can twist the facts by modelling public opinion. The report is about ALL media and the omnipresent chairman

of the Union of Publishers in Bulgaria (Lyubomir Pavlov) is the one who uses the media to behead as it became clear from a recent recording. There is no such thing as infringing freedom of expression, it is much more likely that the reader will get into a schizophrenic bewilderment when faced with the multi-faceted media truth that everyone is molesting.

Reader 19: While there are paid journalists who serve Bulgarian oligarchs, there will be no freedom of expression.

Journalists are frequently accused of not practicing what they preach and one reader even argues that freedom in Bulgaria is equally as bad as freedom of expression:

Reader 20: My message is to everyone: change the channel, we have discovered a long time ago that there are no professionals in all TV stations. I don't know the journalist (Barekov) personally, but what he did gives a bad name to journalists in Bulgaria where freedom is wrongly interpreted. We are all for freedom but look what freedom did in schools, in families, for the press. If he was working abroad, he would have been fired.

This reader actually echoes an argument shared by many Bulgarians “born 1970 and before” who use the terms *democracy* and *freedom of expression* “with open contempt,” because what democracy has brought about in their eyes is “networks of oligarchies and clientilism” and “an ever-expanding economic gap” (Political Affairs 2013). The ongoing media war between the two press groups further exacerbates posters’ negative views of the quality of freedom of expression in the country.

Engagement with Other Users and Quality of Argumentation

Online commentators express negative views on the state of journalism in Bulgaria, but there are nonetheless some valid points, perceptions, and expectations they share with one another. However, an interesting question yet unanswered is whether the online commentators actually listen to each other and engage in democratic discussions. Slightly more than half get involved in conversations (54.5 percent). Sixty-eight percent of them genuinely engage with issues put forward by other readers either by providing their opinion on topics previously mentioned or by asking questions. This is a positive finding because it shows the potential for these online spaces to turn into arenas for democratic conversations. The level of argumentation in the comments about journalism is much higher than in all other posts discussing the media war where mutual accusations of dependency and/or claims that journalists write under own comment are common. In these cases, online commentators genuinely discuss each other’s ideas, reply, challenge, or agree with each other. Below is just one example:

Reader 21: Unfortunately, Bulgarian media fell into the hands of fraudulent oligarchs and other artificial heroes of our transition. The journalists are to blame too. They kneeled down to defend their salaries instead of standing up as their colleagues in any civilised country would do when they see that their owners are trying to impose a dictatorship on them.

Reader 22: This is an objectively substantiated opinion—I agree that journalists are to blame.

Reader 23: I don't think that journalists are to take the whole blame. People like Peevski are making them like that. It's quite another matter that they have to come out of their handle with honour.

Nonetheless, due to the nature of online discussion and the focus of the study on comments using the word “journalism” and its derivatives, it is hard to fully evaluate the quality of argumentation. It is difficult to judge the extent to which participants “open themselves up to the possibility of having their opinion changed by the standpoint and reasoning of other participants” (Richardson & Stanyer 2011: 1000). Furthermore, while this potential for democratic discussion is utilized by some, a key feature of the majority of comments (89.3 percent) is their negativity. Overall, online commentators pass a very negative verdict on the state of journalism and the role journalists play. Very few side with their newspaper (namely, the newspaper they publish their comments in) and its owners. The majority are disappointed by the negative articles about the media war that constantly appear. The following post best summarizes the prevailing sentiment:

Reader 24: That's enough! Barekov tore Trud up to pieces and the guild started shouting “fascism”! What is left for Barekov and his people but to start shouting “communism” and the show will be complete. The fight for viewers and readers reached its culmination—that's why they decided to drive the whole society crazy. I don't want to hear about your problems every minute and hour of the day, you pseudo journalists, who have distanced yourselves from real problems and have focused so much on your owners' issues! How much circulation goes down the toilets of millions of Bulgarians and this is the greatest use of the so-called journalism so that we have to deal with a torn-up newspaper? The truth is simple—no one trusts you, people are just having fun. The fact that you are so childish—playing fascists and partisans—will not move anyone!

Commentators are clearly disillusioned and often share stories about how they or people they know have stopped buying their newspaper regularly. “We are not fools” is also a statement that appears occasionally—indicating audiences' perceived empowerment. As most of the comments show, these actively engaged readers are not fools indeed. They clearly acknowledge some of the issues and challenges journalists face—mainly as a result of the pressures they experience from their owners. However, participants included in our sample have no sympathy for them—they do not condone

what they regard as poor, manipulative, or corrupt journalistic practices—servile and mercenary articles and “toadying to the powerful.”

Conclusion

The study shows that online commentators in our sample have clear views on the present state of journalism and provide interesting definitions of what journalism is or should be. Audiences’ perspectives are important (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014) because they can potentially play two key roles in a democracy: (1) They can provide an online arena for democratic debate, and (2) they can also be used as a tool for journalistic accountability. The qualitative nature of this study also allowed us to adopt a grounded theory approach by analyzing online commentators’ opinions in an open-ended way. Scholars rarely differentiate between real and ideal journalism as if the two are effectively the same (some notable exceptions include Mancini 2000 and Waisbord 2000). Online commentators, however, clearly do that. They differentiate between “the reality of journalism” or “real journalism” and what they perceive as “ideal journalism.” They depict a dire picture of “real journalism” as manipulative with examples of “pre-paid” or “pre-ordered” articles and journalists serving their owners’ interests. This negative portrayal is in contrast to the professional ideals many readers believe in—balance and objectivity, media’s informational role, and journalists as watchdogs serving the public interest. The online commentators’ ideas of what journalism should be about coincide with the ideals journalists share around the world (albeit predominantly in western countries; Hanitzsch et al. 2011). However, these are not the ideals Bulgarian journalists themselves cherish (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). If this is indicative of how the wider public views journalism, this major contradiction helps explain the widening gap in expectations and trust between Bulgarian journalists and their readers. Journalists seem to be experiencing an identity crisis—they are caught between their own perceptions of their role as mainly populist disseminators or critical change agents (Hanitzsch et al. 2011), readers’ idealized views of journalists as detached watchdogs, and the numerous pressures and challenges from their oligarch owners. This is a very worrying trend indeed because it has far-reaching implications for the state of democracy in the country. The van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) study shows that audiences expect a certain degree of responsiveness. Nielsen’s (2014) survey of 583 U.S. journalists, however, found that journalists often ignore reader input because their journalistic norms and conceptions of expertise prevent them from engaging with their readers. One noticeable change that occurred in the course of this research is that the initial articles published about the media war between the two press groups were signed whereas the latest ones were unsigned. Future studies with journalists might further explore the accountability and responsiveness issue particularly in relation to role conceptions. It is certainly worth conducting more immersive, in-depth studies that compare a publication’s readers’ views with those of the journalists working for the same organization.

Nonetheless, the very fact that we can paint such a picture on the basis of online comments indicates an important trend. Despite a growing body of cyberpessimistic studies, there is some scope for temperate cyboptimism. The online space, albeit very limited in Bulgaria due to the fact that not all big newspapers have online fora, is and can be an important arena for democratic conversations in a country in transition from communism to democracy. It may not yet be fully developed as a virtual public sphere especially if we adhere strictly to Habermas's normative ideal but it is certainly an important virtual public space (Papacharissi 2002). A refining of or a move away from deliberative theory would certainly help better explain the situation we observe in Bulgaria. An important task for future research is a reconceptualization of Habermas's normative ideal in light of a growing body of evidence and especially in relation to the potential role virtual public spaces (as opposed to public spheres) play vis-à-vis democracy (Loke 2013; Papacharissi 2002). A systematic or in the very least a narrative review of existing work would be a useful first step in that direction. More qualitative work would also offer useful insights. Cross-national comparative research will further show us what contextual (political, economic, and cultural) factors play a role in the process of online deliberation. This study clearly showed that context matters, and the fact that the online spaces of western newspapers are full of insulting comments (Richardson and Stanyer 2011) does not mean that the same trends are evident in democracies in transition. The majority of comments are very negative but they discuss specific issues, and while some contain offensive statements or accusations, these are a minority in comparison with the ones that genuinely engage in discussion and debate. Some of the discussions are indeed stifled in their infancy by conspiracy theories and mutual accusations, but although this is true for the larger sample, the situation is different in the comments explicitly discussing the state of journalism. However, we should not jump to any grand conclusions because the level of argumentation could not be explored in much depth due to the focus on comments about journalism.

Authors' Note

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/14/business/international/large-bulgarian-bank-goes-bankrupt.html>.
2. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/v%C3%A1clav-%C5%A0t%C4%9Btka/there-and-back-again-media-freedom-and-autonomy-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.
3. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/bulgaria#.VImrBv3ri70>.
4. A list of business tycoons in ten CEE countries is provided in Štětka (2012).
5. <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=4145749>.
6. <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/alde-affiliated-bulgarian-rogue-candidate-withdraws-302394>.
7. Joyce argues that there is no clear standard for the percentage of content units one should recode to calculate agreement rates, and in general, it is lower for online content. See more at <http://digital-activism.org/2013/05/picking-the-best-intercoder-reliability-statistic-for-your-digital-activism-content-analysis/#sthash.FPiR3pzz.dpuf>.
8. <http://www.qualres.org/HomeNega-3694.html>.
9. <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/china's-growing-army-paid-internet-commentators#.VZKcT0u0Jg0>.
10. The online comments are numbered 1 to 24 for the purposes of this article only.

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