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Publisher: Routledge

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Journalism Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjos20>

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Version of record first published: 05 Apr 2012.

To cite this article: Agnieszka Stępińska & Szymon Ossowski (2012): THREE GENERATIONS OF POLISH JOURNALISTS, *Journalism Studies*, 13:5-6, 857-867

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.668000>

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THREE GENERATIONS OF POLISH JOURNALISTS

Professional roles and identities

Agnieszka Stępińska and Szymon Ossowski

This paper provides an update of empirical data on the professional features, values and standards of Polish journalists. The study illustrates clear differences between three generations of journalists: those who have been working for media organizations for several decades now; those who entered the profession immediately following the political transformation of the late 1980s; and those who recently graduated from university. Interestingly, both the youngest and the oldest journalists seem to share some professional approaches. Namely they believe that journalists should not be just news disseminators, but should also provide solutions to the problems of ordinary people. On the other hand, journalists who entered the profession two decades ago seem to be more interested in a watchdog role for the media. Since their professional career started during the political transformation period or soon after, they still perceive themselves as adversaries of public officials.

KEYWORDS journalists; Poland; roles; transformation; values

Introduction

Political transformation in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted, among other things, in the reconstruction of the media system. Once the abolition of press licensing was announced in May 1989 and the Communist press monopoly ended in March 1990, the free market for the print media was re-established and opened up to foreign publishing groups. At that time, the media market was open and flexible, while new titles appeared and disappeared every couple of months. It was the abolition of censorship in June 1990 that completed the political breakthrough for journalists. Furthermore, the 1992 Broadcasting Act introduced a dual broadcasting model, which allowed both private and public television and radio broadcasters.

These developments had serious consequences for Polish journalism. In the early 1990s as many as 1500 journalists left their jobs (Bajka, 2000, p. 45). Among them were journalists who previously supported the Communist regime and those who were not able to respond to technological changes. Some journalists experienced difficulties in adapting to a free market economy and a commercial media system, while others suffered from political and social disorientations (Bajka, 2000, pp. 44–5). At the same time, a new generation of journalists entered the profession. Some of them had previously worked for illegal, anti-communist newspapers and magazines, while others were young people who had recently graduated from university, had little professional experience and no interest in political involvement. While the former seized the opportunity to eventually conduct their chosen job legally, the latter seemed to be attracted either by the prestige of the job, or the salaries (Bajka, 2000, pp. 45–6).

Journalism Studies, Vol. 13, Nos 5–6, 2012, 857–867

ISSN 1461-670X print/1469-9699 online

© 2012 Taylor & Francis <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.668000>

Not surprisingly, the studies conducted in the late 1990s by Bajka (2000) showed that journalists who entered the profession just a decade earlier and those who have been working in the media organizations since the 1970s and 1980s varied in terms of professional values and standards. The purpose of this paper is to provide updated empirical data on the characteristics of media workers in Poland. In particular, we aim to trace similarities and differences between three “generations” of Polish journalists, that is those who have worked for media organizations for more than two decades, those who entered the profession immediately after the political transformation in the early 1990s, and those who just recently graduated from university and started their first jobs.

Previous Studies

Zbigniew Bajka, who in the 1970s and 1980s studied journalists’ motivations, their perception of media functions and relations between journalists and government, found that journalists believed in their “public mission”. Journalists believed the media should help other people to solve their problems, while at the same time they emphasized the watchdog role of the news media. What they did not want was to be perceived as “political officers” or actors related to the government in any way. However, at that time the profession was strongly affected by the political regime (Bajka, 1991).

A decade later, Bajka (2000) conducted an Internet survey among 250 journalists working at daily newspapers, magazines and electronic media. While comparing the findings from his previous studies, Bajka (1991) noted an important variation in aspects of the job evaluated across the three decades (the 1970s to 1990s). Namely journalists of the 1990s appreciated the opportunity to: follow current affairs, meet interesting people and visit new places, as well as to possess new skills and enjoy the prestige of the profession. At the same time, less frequently than earlier generations, they expected to have an opportunity to influence people’s opinions and attitudes, or to help people solve their problems (Bajka, 2000, pp. 52–3). It seemed that Polish journalists who entered the profession right after the transformation period were more pragmatic and self-oriented and less idealistic than their predecessors. Finally, Bajka studied the issues of journalists’ autonomy and level of professionalization. The findings revealed that as many as 93 per cent of respondents believed that although in most of the cases journalists express their own opinions, they have to “occasionally” promote the opinions of the other actors (Bajka, 2000, p. 55).

The Study

Our study is based on 329 telephone interviews that were conducted with a random sample of Polish journalists in October and November 2009. The interviews, which lasted about 15 minutes each, were collected by Pentor Research International Poznan, a well-known polling company.

We defined journalists as media personnel responsible for the information content of several types of media: daily newspapers, weekly magazines, monthly magazines, news services (agencies), radio and TV stations, and online news media. Because a significant number of media personnel in Poland have limited employment contracts, we did not restrict our sample to those journalists who are salaried, full-time employees. We excluded

TABLE 1
The sample ($N = 329$)

	<i>N</i>	%
Daily newspapers	46	14
Weekly magazines	46	14
Monthly magazines	112	34
Press agencies	5	1.5
TV stations	43	13
Radio stations	61	18.5
Online media	16	5
Total	329	100

from the study administrative personnel and those working as camera operators or sound technicians. In order to design the sample, we decided to compile first a list of all Polish news organizations with the help of the most recent Media and Advertising Almanac (2007/2008). Table 1 presents the final sample by the media sector.

The aim of the study was to trace similarities and differences between journalists who entered the profession before, during and after the transformation period. Hence, in what follows, we present the results of our survey broken down by the age category, not the media sector (for more about Polish journalists representing different media sectors and organizations see Stepinska and Ossowski 2011). However, instead of dividing the sample into three main groups, we decided to distinguish between six age categories. The youngest journalists, aged 20–24 years form the first group. They are either students or BA graduates. The second group (25–30 years old) consists of the MA graduates who just recently entered the job market. These two groups, along with at least part of the third one (31–40), comprise a generation of journalists who entered the profession after the transformation period. The fourth group (41–50) and the fifth one (51–60) together form the “transformation generation” with around 20 years of experience of work in media organizations. Finally, the last group (60 years old and more) consists of these journalists who have been working, on average, for more than 25 years now.

Demographic Profile of Polish Journalists

Table 2 provides more details of the demographic profile of the sample. Obviously, the youngest generation of journalists differs from the other groups in terms of their experience, but it is the third group which stands out significantly in terms of education (the reason that only 50 per cent of the journalists from the first group have a university degree is the fact that most of them are still students). The findings show that among journalists in their thirties, less than 78 per cent have a university degree, and only 24 per

TABLE 2
Demographic profile of Polish journalists by age category ($N = 329$)

	Age category						Overall
	20–24	25–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	60 +	
Sex (% male)	63.6	47.7	58.9	75.0	52.6	88.9	59.3
Experience (years)	3	4	10	18	23	26	10
University degree (%)	50.0	90.7	76.8	94.2	94.7	88.9	84.2
Journalism graduates (%)	36.4	39.5	24.1	28.8	36.8	55.6	31.6

TABLE 3
Structure of employment by age category (%) ($N=329$)

Age category	Full time	Part time	Contract	Volunteer	Don't know
20–24	27.3	4.5	54.5	13.6	0
25–30	61.6	3.5	29.1	1.2	4.7
31–40	68.8	8.0	19.6	0	3.6
41–50	88.5	1.9	7.7	0	1.9
51–60	76.3	10.5	7.9	0	5.3
61 +	22.2	22.2	33.4	0	22.2
Overall	65.7	7.3	29.1	1.2	3.9

cent graduated from a journalism programme. At the same time, among those who are in their forties, as many as 94 per cent has a university degree, while less than 30 per cent of them has a degree in journalism.

It is worth mentioning that until the 1990s, few universities offered separate programmes in journalism. In fact, in most of the universities journalism was just a specialization within political science programmes, which were ideologically influenced during the Communist regime. When the transformation generation entered the profession, the free media market in Poland had just been established and there were many new positions for young people, but the diploma in political science was not welcomed in the media. Today, media or journalism studies are offered by 42 public and private universities in Poland. Consequently, in the last decade more professionally educated people joined media organizations (almost 40 per cent among the respondents aged between 25 and 30 graduated from a journalism programme).

Structure of Employment

While before 1989, most journalists were full-time media personnel, two decades later more than 20 per cent of journalists overall and almost 60 per cent of television professionals are contract workers (Stepinska and Ossowski 2011). Table 3 traces the differences between age categories in terms of the structure of employment. The findings clearly show that more than 50 per cent of the youngest journalists are contract workers and 15 per cent are volunteers, while less than one-third are full salaried employees. Since that category of our sample consists mostly of students, their employment status seems to be adequate to their qualifications.

At the same time, most of the journalist in their forties and fifties (88.5 and 76.3 per cent, respectively) are full-time media personnel. On the other hand, the category of so-called “graduates” may feel frustrated and insecure at the job market; one-third of them are not even part-time employees, and since positions in media organizations are held by people just a decade or two older than they are, they generally have little chance of getting a promotion in the organization in the short term.

Membership of Professional Associations

Before 1981 almost all journalists were members of the Polish Journalists Association (established in 1951, dissolved by the communist authorities in 1982 and re-established after 1989; see Bajka, 2000, p. 43). In the 1990s, about 10,000 journalists were members of a professional association or union, but 40 per cent of them were retired journalists (Bajka,

TABLE 4
Membership of journalists' associations by age category (%) ($N = 329$)

Age category	No	Yes	Don't know
20–24	100	0	0
25–30	95.3	3.5	1.2
31–40	88.4	9.8	1.8
41–50	73.1	25.0	1.9
51–60	76.3	23.7	0
61 +	33.3	66.7	0
Overall	84.5	14.3	0.6

2000, p. 42). Table 4 reveals that in 2009 less than 20 per cent overall of Polish journalists claimed that they were members of an association, but again, most of them were journalists over 60 years old. At the same time, the post-transformation generation was not involved in activities of professional organizations at all. Since membership is not obligatory and the real and symbolic power of professional organizations is rather limited in the media system in Poland, young journalists do not find any reason to associate with their peers.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of the study was to identify similarities and differences between three generations of Polish journalists. The analysis addresses two main research areas:

RQ1: How do the journalists evaluate the media organization they are working for?

Namely journalists were asked to express their opinions on: the general performance of the organization, the amount of autonomy they have in selecting stories to be covered, and their assessment of their level of job satisfaction.

RQ2: Which media roles are the most important for Polish journalists?

The other part of our questionnaire was designed to find out more about how Polish journalists evaluate various key functions of the media. We followed Culbertson's (1983) distinction between three main professional approaches: (1) traditional (neutral), stressing fact accuracy and speed; (2) interpretative, incorporating social science and historical research to study every aspect of the events and their meanings; and (3) activist, or proactive reporting with a list of prescriptions to correct the illness of society. The list in the questionnaire is based on Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) and includes 14 typical media functions, representing major media roles, such as a disseminator, interpretator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer.

Concerning RQ1, two opposite hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: The post-transformation generation of journalists would express more criticism than older journalists.

As the findings collected in Table 3 show, most of the young journalists have only loose relations with media organizations (contract, internship). Hence, they may feel less

attached to the media organization and could be more eager to criticize its performance. Furthermore, since they have less experience, presumably there is an editorial control established over their work describing a level of freedom and a level of job satisfaction.

H2: The pre-transformation and transformation generations of journalists would express more criticism than the young, post-transformation generation of journalists.

Older journalists are usually more attached to their media organization. Since most of them are full-time media personnel (see Table 3), we assume that they feel more secure about their job. Hence, they may express their negative opinions about the media performance more openly than young journalists who have just entered the profession and are still enjoying their “honeymoon period” (namely they are too excited to evaluate the organization properly). Furthermore, the pre-transformation generation has more experience and journalists would be more concerned about the editorial policy and the factors that may limit the amount of their autonomy in selecting stories.

Concerning RQ2, we suggest one hypothesis:

H3: The post-transformation generation of Polish journalists would not share a traditional perception of media functions and professional journalists’ roles with the two other generations.

The traditional model of journalism, which focused on political, cultural and social issues, developed during the nineteenth century (Łojek et al., 1988). In the post-war era, Polish journalists viewed themselves as social educators, with a strong sense of the political nature of their jobs, guided more by the consideration of their social mission as defined by their political sponsors than by a story’s attractiveness for the audience (Jakubowicz, 1992).

The youngest generation of Polish journalists entered the profession in the new millennium when the media market was already highly competitive (Bajka, 2000, p. 45). They have never experienced any media control by the state or any other model for financing the media, except the model where commercial and public media compete for advertising revenue. Thus, we assume that they would pay more attention to the functions of the media that are related to generating profit (e.g. concentrating on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience), while journalists who have been working in media organizations for at least two decades fit more closely to the traditional model of Polish journalism. Namely they would be more concerned about providing interpretations of the reported events and the suggested solutions to the social problems.

Findings

Evaluation of the Media Organization

Table 5 provides the findings that support H2. Indeed, the youngest journalists seem to be less eager to express their criticism concerning the performance of the media organizations they are working for than any of the other groups. As many as 80 per cent of them described the way the organization provides information to the public as either “outstanding” or “very good”. At the same time, journalists in their thirties seem to be less

TABLE 5
Evaluation of media performance by age category (%) ($N = 329$)

Age category	Outstanding	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't know	Refusal
20–24	22.7	59.1	9.1	9.1	0	0	0
25–30	10.5	52.3	29.1	8.1	0	0	0
31–40	11.6	47.3	23.2	12.5	0	3.6	1.8
41–50	13.5	55.8	23.1	5.8	0	1.9	0
51–60	10.5	42.1	42.1	5.3	0	0	0
61 +	22.2	11.1	33.3	33.3	0	0	0
Overall	12.2	48.9	26.1	9.7	0	2.1	0.9

enthusiastic about their media organizations, but this is the eldest group of respondents that is the most dissatisfied with the way media organizations perform. However, no single journalist in our sample was wholly critical of the media organization and its performance (no respondent evaluated the media performance as “poor”—see Table 5).

Similar conclusions may be drawn from the analysis of the responses to the question concerning the amount of autonomy. Table 6 shows that the youngest journalists are the most optimistic about their level of editorial freedom. Almost 80 per cent of them believe that they have “almost complete” autonomy in selecting stories to be covered. Interestingly, the second age category—those who recently graduated from university—seem to have a relatively strong feeling that their freedom is limited, although only a small number of them (1.2 per cent) claim that they have no freedom at all. Still, only one-third of the respondents between 25 and 30 years old are really satisfied with the extent of the autonomy they believe they enjoy. Moreover, as many as half of the representatives of the eldest generation of journalists in our sample express concern about the level of journalists’ freedom.

Overall, more than 40 per cent of the respondents declare that they can select the topics they report without any limit and/or pressure, while less than 20 per cent feel that they have no real freedom. It might be surprising, since in the late 1990s as many as 42 per cent of journalists saw the source of limits in the editors-in-chief, owners of the media organizations, and editors, 20 per cent mentioned a phenomenon of editors’ self-censorship and 11 per cent mentioned journalists’ self-censorship, while 13 per cent named a market orientation of the media as a source of the limits of journalists’ freedom (Bajka, 2000, p. 55). It is hard to believe that all these pressures have disappeared in a decade, especially a total freedom for very young journalists is doubtful. We would argue here that either they are simply not aware of the editorial mechanisms of news selection,

TABLE 6
Freedom in selecting stories by age category (%) ($N = 329$)

Age category	Not at all	Some	A great deal	Almost complete	Don't know	No response
20–24	0	0	18.2	77.3	0	4.5
25–30	1.2	20.9	47.7	29.1	0	1.2
31–40	0	17.0	40.2	42.0	1.9	0.9
41–50	0	7.7	32.7	57.7	2.6	0
51–60	5.3	10.5	26.3	55.3	0	0
61 +	0	55.6	22.2	22.2	0	0
Overall	0.9	15.5	37.4	44.4	0.9	0.9

TABLE 7
Level of job satisfaction by age category (%) ($N=329$)

Age category	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	No response
20–24	50.0	50.0	0	0	0	0
25–30	22.1	70.9	2.3	1.2	1.2	2.3
31–40	17.9	75.0	3.6	0.9	0.9	1.8
41–50	11.5	80.8	1.9	0	5.8	0
51–60	15.8	78.9	2.6	0	2.6	0
61 +	33.3	44.4	11.1	11.1	0	0
Overall	20.7	72.0	3.0	0.9	2.4	0.9

or they are not raising any controversial issues, so they do not experience any political or editorial pressure.

Table 7 provides additional findings that support earlier observations. When asked about the general level of job satisfaction, most of the journalists seem to be “fairly satisfied”, but in a group of the youngest journalists as many as 50 per cent are “very satisfied”, and the other 50 per cent of them are “fairly satisfied”. At the same time, representatives of both pre-transformation and transformation generations are relatively less satisfied.

The highest level of enthusiasm among the youngest respondents is quite understandable. As we mentioned above, most of them are students who enjoy the fact that they may act as journalists but they are not involved in any decision-making process. Holding no position at the media organization, they do not have any responsibility and consequently they may perceive their work more as an adventure than a real job.

The Importance of Various Aspects of Journalists' Jobs

We also asked respondents to judge the importance of various aspects of their jobs. Table 8 collects the percentage of the answers given as “very important” by the various age categories. These aspects can be divided into four groups: financial aspects (pay, benefits, job security), career (skills, promotion), professional environment (editorial policy,

TABLE 8
Importance of various aspects of journalists' job by age category (% of “very important”) ($N=329$)

	20–24	25–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61 +	Overall
Pay	50.0	64.0	70.5	61.5	76.3	44.4	65.7
Fringe benefits	50.0	45.3	37.5	36.5	36.8	22.2	39.2
The editorial policies of the organization	45.5	47.7	62.5	53.8	63.2	77.8	56.2
Job security	68.2	60.5	57.1	61.5	63.2	55.6	59.0
The chance to develop the professional skills	95.5	88.4	82.1	73.1	52.6	55.6	79.0
The amount of autonomy	81.8	82.6	87.5	84.6	89.5	100	85.7
The chance to go ahead in the organization	54.5	50.0	30.4	28.8	18.4	11.1	35.0
The chance to help people	63.6	68.6	58.0	61.5	71.1	100	65.0
The chance to influence public affairs	59.1	58.1	56.3	57.7	60.5	77.8	57.8

autonomy), and “public mission” (helping people and influencing public affairs). Not surprisingly, the youngest generation of journalists is more than any other age category interested in the opportunity to develop professional skills and get promotion. At the same time, the youngest journalists are less interested in such “professional” aspects as editorial policy and the amount of autonomy. Clearly, they are focused more on their individual careers (and job security) than on organizational affairs. By contrast, those who have held media positions for some time, seem to pay more attention to the organization and its policy, as well as to the level of freedom concerning the selection of stories.

In particular, journalists over 60 pay attention mostly to the “institutional” aspects of the job. These journalists do not have to worry about their positions, promotion or even pay. Instead, they consider themselves as those who could influence public affairs and help people.

The Importance of Media Functions

Once we compare the exact number of the “very important” answers collected in Table 9, we are able to recognize priorities across age categories. Interestingly, one may find some similarities between the youngest and the oldest groups of respondents, which means that H3 is only partly supported. First of all, representatives of these two age categories mention providing entertainment and relaxation as the major role of the media less frequently (32 and 22 per cent, respectively). The fact that journalists in their sixties do

TABLE 9
Importance of media functions by age category (% of “very important”) (N = 329)

	20– 24	25– 30	31– 40	41– 50	51– 60	61 +	Overall
1. Get information to the public quickly	90.9	83.7	79.5	76.9	84.2	88.9	81.2
2. Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems	50.0	67.4	67.0	63.5	60.5	44.4	63.5
3. Provide entertainment and relaxation	31.8	34.9	34.8	34.6	36.8	22.2	34.7
4. Investigate claims and statements made by the government	27.3	51.2	38.4	38.5	44.7	33.3	41.0
5. Provide analysis and interpretation of international developments	40.9	41.9	39.3	36.5	44.7	66.7	40.7
6. Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified	27.3	31.4	36.6	30.8	31.6	66.7	34.3
7. Concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience	59.1	62.8	55.4	63.5	57.9	77.8	59.6
8. Discuss national policy while it is still being developed	31.8	55.8	41.1	40.4	47.4	55.6	45.3
9. Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public	86.4	73.3	69.6	73.1	76.3	100	73.6
10. Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly sceptical of their actions	59.1	70.9	71.4	78.8	73.7	66.7	71.4
11. To set the political agenda	54.5	61.6	59.8	69.2	57.9	55.6	60.5
12. Give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs	77.3	72.1	54.5	55.8	55.3	88.9	62.3
13. Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues	59.1	53.5	55.4	69.2	55.3	77.8	57.1
14. Point people toward possible solutions to society's problem	68.2	65.1	63.4	61.5	47.4	77.8	61.7

not perceive themselves as entertainers fits a general picture of the pre-transformation, pre-market-oriented media. They perceive themselves mostly as news disseminators, educators (by developing the intellectual and cultural interests of the public, providing interpretation and pointing people toward possible solutions to society's problem) and mobilizers (by motivating ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues and giving ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs).

The post-transformation generation of Polish journalists, however, while being equally concerned about the importance of providing information quickly to the public and giving people a chance to express their opinions, is less interested in playing a role as educators. Since they have neither the relevant knowledge nor experience to hold positions that allow them to write columns and provide analysis, they concentrate on the roles that are available to them. Nevertheless, it is even more surprising that journalists working for the market-oriented media do not want to acknowledge that one of their functions is to entertain the public; they are much more eager to admit that they should concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience.

The other characteristic shared by the youngest and oldest generation of Polish journalists is the relatively modest attention paid to the adversarial role of the media. On the contrary, journalists who entered the profession two decades ago seem more interested in investigating claims and statements made by politicians. Since their professional career started during the political transformation period, they still perceive themselves as an adversary of public officials.

Conclusions

This paper contains the findings of one of the most extensive surveys of Polish journalists attitudes conducted since the late 1990s. The structure of the sample allows us to trace not only the professional values shared by most media people, but also the differences between representatives of the three identified generations. Journalists under 30 years have little professional experience (three to four years) and most of them still do not hold any position in the media organizations. Hence, they are not exactly aware of the mechanisms of pressure and limitations that operate within the profession. As a result, their perception of media organizations is optimistic. They are mostly focused on providing information, while other media roles, including educator and adversary, seem to be less important for them. But they still believe that the media should serve the public mission.

The generation of transformation shares the most explicit identity. They entered the profession at the moment of a significant political change that brought, among other shifts, the abolition of press licensing and censorship. Thus, they still pay a good deal of attention to such aspects of their job as their editorial autonomy and editorial policy. This is a group that perceives itself to be a watchdog, constantly sceptical of the public officials' actions and investigating government's claims. Furthermore, they feel that the media should not only provide information, but also act as an interpreter of complex issues.

Finally, the eldest and the most experienced Polish journalists express their criticisms most openly. At the same time, they share with the youngest journalists a sense that the

media should serve ordinary people by making their voice heard and by providing solutions to the most important social problems.

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