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Czech journalists in the 21st century: who are they?

Abstract: Who are Czech journalists and what do they do? Based on data from 291 interviews with Czech journalists working in the news media at various levels between 2012 and 2014, for the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (www.worldsofjournalism. org), the paper introduces for the first time an overview of the most important results of the Czech part of the study. We present an analysis of the data on journalists' working conditions, the most and least important perceived influences on their work, as well as their level of trust in various institutions, recent significant changes perceived in their profession and the professional roles they prefer. The basic demographic data of our sample is also given. The survey was done in two phases, between which significant media ownership changes took place, making the results highly up-to-date. We conclude that the position of journalists is changing. Journalists are required to write more stories than before, yet have less time to research them. Although they assert the importance of journalistic ethics, they have also perceived that ethical standards have somewhat weakened recently. Nevertheless, they express a high level of autonomy and freedom in their work.

Key words: Czech journalists, media, working conditions, living conditions, influences

Introduction

During the last three decades, the Czech media landscape has gone through several important development points. The fall of communism at the end of the 1980s brought about the biggest transformation. As the media achieved freedom, the ownership structure changed fundamentally. Foreign owners of the media entered the market and owned the major media for the next two decades. This brought Western standards of media functioning to the Czech Republic (e.g. Gross, 2004 or Jakubowicz, 2001). Twenty years later, another significant change of ownership began, when the foreign owners left the market after the economic recession, and new Czech owners entered the scene, buying up the Czech media. Some of these new owners are frequently called media barons or oligarchs, as

there is often a strong interconnection between their other businesses, as well as in some cases with their political activities. Ownership of media is usually the last piece of the puzzle in their influence on the country. These two large ownership changes have substantially shaped the Czech media landscape and are the reason for some of its specificities.

In the past couple of years, changing patterns within journalists' working practices and routines have been quite a hot topic. Changes are sometimes attributed to a bad media business model before the economic recession in 2008 (see Picard, 2013); regardless, the businesses set up in the late 20th century in large, new concrete buildings and employing lots of people revealed itself to be absolutely unsustainable in the new economic conditions. Reductions of staff and increased work seemed logical steps.

In the Czech Republic, these processes were accompanied by the media market transformation. The foreign owners of print media in particular, pressured by the economic crisis within the field, sold their acquisitions to local business tycoons involved in politics (for more information see e.g. Hájek, Štefaniková, 2014 or Waschková Císařová, Metyková, 2015). This situation corresponds with the trend within the whole Central Eastern European (CEE) region (e.g. Wyka, 2007), although concentration of media ownership is not only a problem in CEE, as e.g. Hanretty (2014) describes.

Digital technologies and the boom of online media and news channels have also brought new challenges for journalists all over the world. A key aspect is the amount of news items and stories necessary to 'feed' this never-ending flow of information (Agarwal, Barthel, 2013).

This paper tries to describe the situation of journalists and their working conditions in the Czech Republic. These conditions are informed by the Czech Republic's belonging to the CEE region, but also reflect the worldwide results of the economic crisis and coping with new types of work for online media.

Methodology

For this paper, data from the Czech part of the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS) were used. Only professional journalists working for the news media (no lifestyle magazines or radio stations broadcasting only music) were involved in this research. The definition of a professional journalist was the following: "[a] person who earns at least 50 per cent

of his or her income from paid labor for news media and is involved in producing and editing journalistic content as well as in editorial supervision and coordination."

The total number of journalists who completed questionnaires² for us (during personal interviews, via telephone and online communication) was 291. Journalists from all kinds of media were involved. We complied with the *Field Manual* of the *WJS* in constructing the sample, as well as in establishing the number of people chosen: "[a] differential is used in order to determine the number of journalists to be selected within each news organization. Three journalists (or less if there are fewer journalists) should be selected from smaller newsrooms, and five from larger news media. What constitutes 'large' and 'small' newsrooms depends on the national context, so each country team should individually decide on this matter." We also chose journalists from all editorial ranks from news organizations.

The most difficult part was to accurately estimate the number of journalists in the Czech Republic, since there is no obligatory membership of any organization for journalists. There are a few active members of the Syndicate of Journalists in the Czech Republic, which is a kind of professional organization; membership is more attractive for senior journalists and those from small regional newspapers, usually freelancers, largely to improve their social status. Therefore, we asked the editors-in-chief, as well as the PR departments in the cases of bigger news organizations, how many journalists in their news departments could be counted as professionals according to the Field Manual. We were successful in the majority of the national media; in the case of our very strong regional media, we took numbers from our qualified estimation based on our knowledge of the Czech media (we have both been working as freelance journalists for more than fifteen years). We calculated the total number of journalists as defined by the Field Manual of WJS at 1,191 journalists. Since many people work within the field and combine media, not earning in each more than half of their total income, and many students hold intern positions, and in addition there are plenty of lifestyle magazines, we can

¹ Field Manual, p. 1, accessed on March 3, 2016, available from: http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/docs/Manual.pdf.

 $^{^2}$ Questionnaire can be downloaded from the Worlds of Journalism Study website: $\label{eq:www.worldsofjournalism.org/download.htm.}$

³ Field Manual, p. 3, accessed on March 3, 2016, available from: http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/docs/Manual.pdf.

say that the total number of Czech journalists is definitely much higher (possibly even three times greater).

We collected data in two periods. The first took place between October 2012 and January 2013 (135 interviews), the second between September 2013 and March 2014 (156 interviews). The response rate differed in both phases (being higher during the first period) and totaled 64.81 per cent. As noted, the biggest Czech media ownership changes within the last twenty years occurred between the survey periods.

Results

Who are Czech journalists: basic demographic data about the sample

In our attempt to describe the journalist population in the Czech Republic, we will start with its age structure, gender, experience, education, religion and political stance. As we can see from the graph below, there are two major peaks in the age structure of media workers. Most of the Czech journalists from our sample belonged to two age groups, one between 24–40 years, and the other from 44–50 years. The reason for this division has its roots in the changes that occurred after the fall of communism in 1989. An influx of new people entered work in the media and numerous new media projects began in the early 1990s. New management also ran the media. The majority had no journalistic background, journalistic education or any experience working in the media. During the following decades, a considerable number of people from this era left the media landscape for other careers, for example, to start their own businesses, work as spokespersons, enter politics or public relations, and so on.

Today, the people who started in the media at the end of the 1980s and are still in the business are mostly in higher managerial positions. This group accounts for the second major division of journalists between 44 and 50 years old. Not many older people from the previous era continue to work in regular positions in the media, so there is a significant demographic drop in the sphere of senior journalists. The majority of people employed in the media today are between 24 and 40 years old. While the demanding and stressful nature of the journalistic profession naturally determines this work for younger people, there are also other factors that contribute to this result.

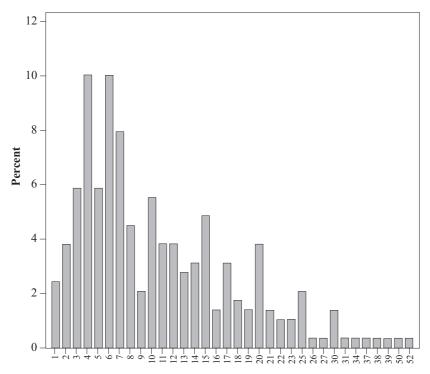
One explanation for the low number of senior journalists is that it is partially a result of economic recession and the general tendency of the Czech media to employ junior journalists. This is primarily economically driven, as wages in the media are not above average. As those on track for senior positions often leave the business, the media relies on younger, less experienced employees in junior positions, including journalism students in almost unpaid intern positions, and so on. A positive aspect of this rejuvenation of the media landscape is that young people usually have some journalistic or media background, are educated in the field and have some theoretical knowledge about the functions of the media.

Graph 1. Age structure of Czech journalists

Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

As the population of Czech journalists is quite young for various reasons, it is no surprise then that many have not worked long as journalists.

We find that the biggest cluster (40.5 per cent) of answers to the question: "How many years have you been working in journalism?" lies between 3 to 7 years.



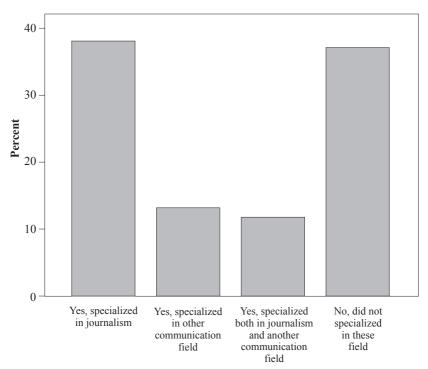
Graph 2. Years working in journalism

Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

If we look at Czech journalists from the point of view of gender, we see there were more men than women working in journalism within our sample (55 per cent vs. 45 per cent), which reflects the newsroom reality. Women are more represented among junior and senior writers than in top management positions (and after coming back from maternity leave, they are often among freelancers). We can find women in positions such as head of cultural staff or editor-in-chief of lifestyle magazines, but there is only one news project with a female editor-in-chief (Sabina Slonková for the online daily Neovlivní.cz) and only one

female editor-in-chief of a news server belonging to a big publishing house (Nad'a Petrová in Idnes.cz).⁴

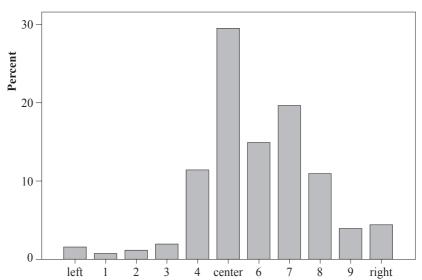
We briefly discussed the tense relationship between journalist education and media professionals in the Czech Republic in our previous qualitative work (Tejkalová, Láb, 2011). The case was confirmed by the results gained from this *WJS* research. A similar proportion of media workers exists with and without journalist training in our sample, which reflects the overall situation very well. Czech journalists are quite well educated, which was also clearly visible from our sample, since 67.7 per cent of the interviewees had completed a university or college education, with the majority of them holding master's degrees and 3.5 per cent even PhDs.



Graph 3. Specialized in journalism or communication

⁴ Information valid for March 10, 2016, more data about the gender gap in Czech media management can be found on the website *Datová žurnalistika* (Data Journalism): http://www.datovazurnalistika.cz/jak-media-ovlivnuji-realitu/.

The structure of the Czech media landscape is especially interesting when considering the political stance of journalists. Most of the respondents placed themselves right of the center of the political spectrum. The second apparent tendency was the moderate right, while there was a nearly complete lack of self-identified leftist journalists. This again reflects the post-1989 development of the media, when most new journalists defined themselves against the previous political regime, so they naturally inclined to the right. This is still valid even almost three decades later, as the position of the Czech media in general can be described as centerright. On the other hand, the structure of the Czech political scene, in which there are mostly center-left, center and center-right political parties, which in the real world do not differ at all, could also be the cause, so political stance has a more symbolic than actual meaning today. The specific political stance of Czech journalists may also help to explain why the Czech media for so long looked kindly on a wide range of odd business practices, affairs and scandals of politicians during the early 1990s. It was not part of social discourse to criticize the acts of the new, democratic government for a long time after 1989, without risking being labeled as communist.



Graph 4. Political stance

A natural distrust in professional organizations and associations is quite characteristic for the Czech media landscape, as another part of the legacy of the pre-1989 era, when everyone had to be organized. Journalists are still not interested in professional organizations. They do not join them, nor found any new ones and do not consider them interesting or important. Only 7.3 per cent of our respondents were members of a professional association. The single professional association dedicated to journalism and media in our country is the Syndicate of Journalists in the Czech Republic. This organization is currently not very active and lacks the attention of professionals, as previously described in Methodology. In general, we can say that the majority of our respondents did not view Syndicate membership as an important agent in improving the quality of their profession, or as a necessary part of their professional careers. This finding has significant consequences, as there is a substantial lack of any force standing behind journalists, assisting them in their job performance, controlling them, commenting on the quality of their work and helping to raise the standards of journalism in the Czech Republic.

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Graph 5. Religion: importance

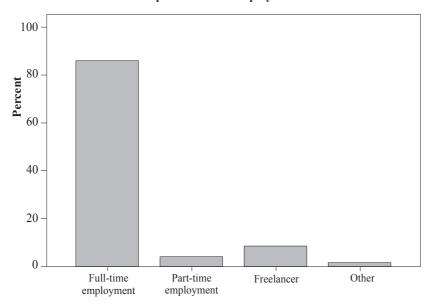
One section of the common Worlds of Journalism Study questionnaire was dedicated to questions about religion, since it can play a very important role in some regions of the world. In the case of the Czech Republic, as is visible from the below chart, religion is not an issue. The majority of Czech journalists within our sample (75.9 per cent) were of no religion or denomination. This feature is typical of the wider Czech population, since during the forty years of the communist regime, religion was not supported in our country and in many cases priests and Catholic believers were severely persecuted. In our research, only 15.6 per cent of respondents declared themselves as belonging to the Catholic Church. Ethnicity is an even more minor issue than religion, since the Czech Republic is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in Europe. This was not always the case, but after the Jewish and Roma holocaust, as well as the expulsion of Germans after World War II and the splitting of Czechoslovakia on January 1, 1993, there is an almost absolute majority of Czechs. From journalists who replied to this question, 98.6 per cent stated they identified as Caucasian

Contracts and incomes: living conditions of Czech journalists

As depicted in the following charts, the overwhelming majority of our respondents (85.6 per cent) worked as full-time journalists, but they quite often had to work for more than one news outlet to get by. 34.3 per cent of journalists had temporary contracts and 23.3 per cent of respondents needed to perform additional paid work outside of journalism. The above trend deepened in media affected by the recent big changes of ownership, since merging of newsrooms and staff reductions took place. In regards to salary, 24.4 per cent of respondents belonged to the fourth lowest category (out of ten) we posed, with a monthly salary after taxation between CZK 15,001 and 20,001 (approx. 554–739 Euro) and 22.6 per cent to the fifth category: CZK 20,001–25,000 (approx. 740–924 Euro). With an average monthly salary before taxation in the Czech Republic of CZK 26,072⁵ (after taxation this is ca. CZK 16,817, or 621 Euro), we can conclude that Czech journalists are usually paid similar to the average Czech or slightly better, but we definitely cannot describe journalism as a prestigious profession.

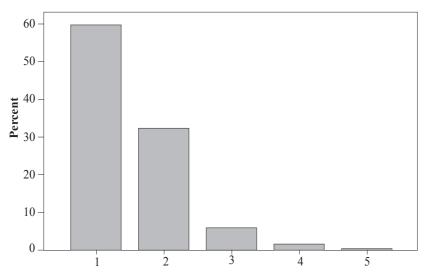
⁵ Information gained from the websites of the *Czech Statistical Office*, accessed on January 10, 2016, available from: https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/ari/average-wages-3-quarter-of-2015.

Graph 6. Current employment



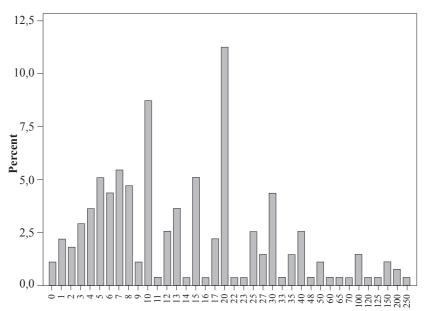
Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

Graph 7. Number of news outlets worked for



Less time for researching, more work to be done: working conditions

Only a small minority of Czech journalists can afford to work only on a specific topic. Most of our respondents (81.1 per cent) had to be prepared to cover any subject and categorized themselves as generalists more than specialists (in the questionnaire specialists were described as people working on one specific beat). As the bar graph below shows, the number of produced or edited news items within one week was measurably high (the highest numbers are from the editors of continuous TV and radio broadcasting). From this point of view, it is not surprising that when asked about the change in available time to research their stories and work on a single story, journalists said the time for research had decreased. On the other hand, journalists felt they spent much more time at work than they did five years ago. One of the reasons behind this fact is that, with the rise of online media, most newsrooms work on print (or audiovisual) as well as online versions at the same time, with the same amount of staff, so there are more competencies and responsibilities placed on journalists.

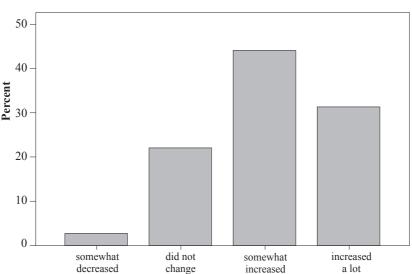


Graph 8. Number of news items produced/edited

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Graph 9. Change: time available for researching stories

a lot Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.



Graph 10. Change: average working hours of journalists

decreased

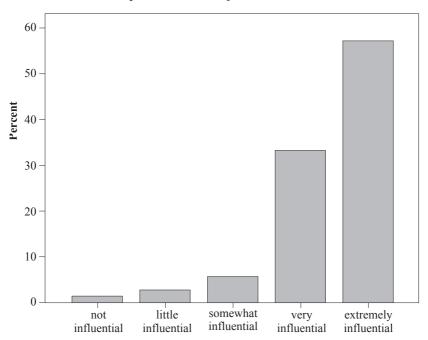
change

increased

a lot

The most important perceived influences on journalists' work

We have dealt with the influences that may be connected with the changes in media ownership (influences that have been discussed most often in the Czech Republic in the last two years) in separate papers (Hájek et al., 2015 or Tejkalová et al., 2015). Here, we will generally outline the results of a battery of questions about various perceived influences (ranging from personal beliefs, peers in the media to politicians and pressure groups). According to our data, following ethical rules and standards was most important to our journalists (being extremely important for 57 per cent of journalists within our sample). The practical influence of information access followed (extremely important for 55.6 per cent of people) along with media law and regulation (41.1 per cent of journalists considered them to be extremely important). Personal values and beliefs took third place (39.9 per cent think they are extremely important).



Graph 11. Influences: journalism ethics

Additional pragmatic influences similar to information access included the availability of news-gathering resources (important for 91.6 per cent of journalists overall, for 69.9 per cent being even very or extremely important) or time limits (important in total for 89.2 per cent).

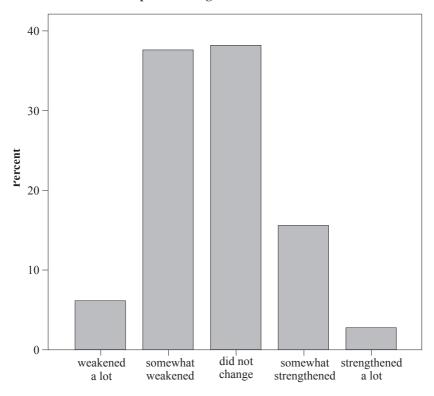
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Graph 12. Influences: information access

Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

It is also notable to compare that while journalistic ethics was extremely or very important for so many journalists, at the same time, when asked about the perceived change in ethical standards within the past five years, almost 38 per cent of them felt those standards had somewhat slipped. We might possibly explain this when we consider the results of the question about journalists' possible roles in society. Since 98.3 per cent of our sample thought journalists should "report things as they are,"

we might conclude that this makes them sensitive to examples of poor practice by colleagues. Such a result could also arise from the perceived influences of the ownership changes.



Graph 13. Change: ethical standards

Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

Perceived roles of journalists

The topic of perceived roles journalists should play in society is strongly connected to the perceived influences on journalists' work. A great deal of literature and case studies exist about the roles journalists perform, or think they should perform (e.g. McQuail, 2013 or Hanitzsch, Mellado, 2011). In the Czech Republic, there is still a strong normative influence of

the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the objective, non-partisan position of journalism within society. For 91 per cent of journalists within our sample it was extremely or very important to act as a detached observer. Respondents also did not want to interfere with governmental politics (for 90.3 per cent of them it was unimportant or of little importance to support government policy, as well as for 84.8 per cent of journalists it was unimportant or of little importance to act as an adversary of the government). This kind of conservativeness was also expressed in the answer to the question of how important it was for our interviewees to motivate people to participate in political activity. It was unimportant, or of little importance for 56.3 per cent of journalists.

40 –
20 –
unimportant little somewhat very extremely important important important important

Graph 14. Roles: be a detached observer

Source: Alice N. Tejkalová, Filip Láb.

On the other hand, our findings reveal a strong inclination towards the educator role. For 83.1 per cent of our respondents, educating the audi-

ence was of some importance (for 52.2 per cent it was very, or extremely important), and for 71.8 per cent to provide information people need to make political decisions.

Concerning the relationship between the media and powerful interest groups like business people and politicians, we can again compare two batteries of answers that have a lot in common. When asked about the perceived influence of business people on their work, even though almost half of the interviews were conducted after the biggest media ownership change, for the work of 82.2 per cent of journalists in our sample the influence of business people was not perceived as strongly influential. This result correlates with the answer to whether a journalist's role should be to monitor and scrutinize business. This was extremely or very important only for 39.1 per cent of journalists. The majority were apparently not very interested in business circles (economics journalism needs much more time to be conducted well, as well as a higher level of at least selfeducation in this field) and therefore did not see the influence of business people on their work as strong. Even though there are from time to time cases about political pressures on media content, according to 74.8 per cent of our respondents, politicians possess no or little influence on their work. In addition, only 52 per cent see their role to monitor and scrutinize political leaders to be very or extremely important.

Journalists' autonomy

We also examined how journalists perceive their level of autonomy when performing their jobs, how they select their stories, how free they feel when deciding what aspect of their story should be emphasized and, last but not least, how often they participate in editorial and newsroom meetings.

When speaking about overall freedom in selecting news stories, our respondents expressed a high level of freedom. Nearly half of the journalists questioned (46.7 per cent) felt a great deal of freedom to select the news stories they work on, 24.4 per cent felt complete freedom and 33.1 per cent felt some freedom. Only about 3.8 per cent of journalists felt little or no freedom at all. We also compared two groups of journalists, one including journalists with editorial and managerial competencies, and the other without any decision making competencies. Here a significant difference was expressed. Journalists with editorial competencies had

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about a 7.2 per cent higher sense of complete freedom than reporters, news writers and journalists in junior positions.

Regarding freedom in deciding which aspects of stories should be emphasized, again a very high level of perceived freedom was claimed by our respondents: 47.8 per cent of all respondents expressed feeling a great deal of freedom, 27.7 per cent complete freedom and 21.5 per cent some freedom. Only 2.4 per cent of journalists stated feeling little or no freedom. No significant difference was found when comparing staff with editorial and decision making competencies with reporters and news writers.

We were further interested in how often journalists participate in decision making, editorial and newsroom coordination, attending editorial meetings or assigning reporters. A marked difference was apparent between the whole sample and journalists without decision making competencies. There was a much higher level of participation by editors and managing staff compared to the entire sample (26.6 per cent always participate in decision processes, 22.1 per cent very often participate, 21.4 per cent sometimes and only 17.2 per cent never participate) with reporters and writing journalists (of whom only 7.2 per cent always participate, 14.7 per cent very often, and sometimes 30.7 per cent participate, rarely participate 19.0 per cent and almost never 28.8 per cent).

Findings from this part of the survey reveal that despite the fact reporters and writing journalists do not participate in decision making as much as their colleagues with higher levels of responsibility, a considerably high level of perceived freedom and autonomy remains. This perceived freedom exists across the whole scale of positions in the newsroom in relation to journalists performing their jobs, choosing topics and selecting how their stories are built.

Conclusions

From the results presented in this paper we can conclude that the current working conditions of Czech journalists are not different from the working conditions described by other authors for journalists in the CEE region. Czech journalists are required to cope with more work, yet have less time to prepare their stories. This reality is due to several factors, including the development of online media and news channels (both TV and radio), staff reduction and general financial restrictions in response to the worldwide economic recession and the merging of the media after new purchases of business tycoons. Our journalists quite often work for more than one media outlet, in temporary positions and in some cases in additional jobs besides journalism to cover their living expenses.

Czech journalists see as their professional role as taking the position of a detached observer of the world and strongly support the idea that a journalist should refer to events "as they are." The majority do not have any ambitions to play a politically active role or be the agent of any social change.

When asked about the perceived influences on their work, journalists do not mention politicians, pressure groups or the military, as is typical of many post-authoritarian countries. However, they speak about the influence of journalistic standards, personal beliefs or values, and also more practical influences like the availability of news-gathering resources and access to information. Czech journalists also express having quite a lot of freedom to choose the topics on which they want to work, as well as participation in the decision making processes within newsrooms.

Nevertheless, at the same time, more than one third of journalists feel the ethical standards within journalism have somewhat slipped in the past couple of years. This result could be connected to the importance the journalists within our sample put on the necessity of journalistic ethics. They could possibly be more sensitive to rules being broken by colleagues, or such a response could stem from the social climate connected with the media ownership changes.

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