

Economic foundations of morality: Questions of transparency and ethics in Russian journalism



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ABSTRACT: This study examines the questions of ethics and transparency in Russian journalism. The paper explains instances of non-transparent behavior among Russian journalists in light of economic hardship that Russian journalists in the province face in their everyday life. Specifically, this study attempts to explicate the connection between transparency, journalism ethics, and economic and social conditions in which regional journalists function in Russia. This paper argues that morality may depend on economic conditions of an individual and poor economic conditions tend to diminish human dignity. In turn, diminished human dignity more readily puts in jeopardy professional ethical principles and contributes to non-transparent media practices. Poor economic conditions have implications for regional journalism practice in Russia, where they create a vicious circle which Russian journalists fail to break.

KEYWORDS: Russia, regional journalism, transparency, ethics, economic dependency, human dignity



INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to promote greater accountability and public trust, media and journalism embraced the principles of transparency (Craft & Heim, 2009; Singer, 2007). Wasserman (2006) argued that transparency in the news media has emerged as a response to claims of bias. Furthermore, the lack of media transparency and media bias are often perceived as a form of corruption. This is particularly true for transitional democracies, such as Russia, a country where democratic media traditions are yet to be firmly established.

In journalism, questions of transparency and ethics go hand-in-hand (Singer, 2007). Plaisance (2007) argued that the concept of transparency is critical to the

discussion of ethics in journalism for several reasons. First, transparency does not simply address the content of the message, but it also requires consideration of the form and nature of interaction. Second, transparent communication is the foundation for rational and autonomous behavior of human beings. Third, transparency is closely connected with the notions of truth and truth-telling, which are paramount for journalism (Singer, 2007). Transparency is also responsible for maintaining public trust and serves as a tool of accountability in journalism. Finally, transparency dignifies human communication, and the lack thereof means a lack of respect for human dignity and exercise of reason (Plaisance, 2007).

Arguments for transparency's importance are grounded in journalism practice, and journalists exhibit transparent behavior in order to be trusted (Craft & Heim, 2009). However, in some instances, journalists are ready to disregard the need for transparency in professional practice and engage in non-transparent behavior. This paper uses the example of regional journalism in Russia to examine instances in which journalists compromise public trust and neglect the need for media transparency. We describe such instances in the context of economic hardship that Russian regional journalists face in their everyday life.

The significance of this exploration lies in the approach taken to analyze the ethical implications of the non-transparent behavior of Russian regional journalists. Traditionally, lack of transparency is seen as one of the ethical issues in journalism (Craft & Heim, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Smith, 2008), but few studies examined the causes of non-transparent (and thereby unethical) behavior among journalists. While several studies connected personal and professional ethical standards with education, income, and media systems (Hunt & Chonko, 1984; Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003; Lodamo & Skjerdal, 2009; Pratt, 1991), few searched for explanations of unethical behavior. This paper explicates the connection among transparency, journalism ethics, and the economic and social conditions in which journalists function.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is practiced in two forms: as information availability and as information disclosure. Craft and Heim (2009) consider transparency that concerns the availability of information as passive. Passivity of transparency is rooted in information ethics that are based on the infosphere, that is, the information environment in which people exist (Floridi, 2008). In journalism, transparency as availability often is manifested in a form of openly available editorial policies, lists of criteria for newsworthiness, and contact lists of newsroom members (Craft & Heim, 2009; Smith, 2008; Ziomek, 2005).

Transparency as information disclosure requires an active process of bringing information into view (Singer, 2007). The active nature of transparency as disclosure assumes openness in decision-making before, during, and after the act of com-

municating. This includes disclosing and explaining processes by which the information was gathered, analyzed, and presented to the public (Ziomek, 2005). In journalism, transparency as disclosure is being practiced more frequently than is transparency as availability. Smith (2008) refers to transparency by disclosure as “explaining ourselves” (p. 82) to argue that transparency and openness may lead the way to the restoration of media credibility.

Finally, transparency is ensured by journalists’ code of ethics. Many codes of ethics manifest their dedication to transparency through statements about commitment to truth, accuracy, objectivity, and accountability. Cooper (1989) and Hafez (2002) reported that the search for truth and objectivity is a universal feature and an intercultural norm of media ethics. For example, the Code of Professional Ethics of Russian Journalists (1994) clearly prohibits distributing deceptive information and requires journalists to clearly identify their sources and to distinguish facts from opinions.

Transparency in journalism often takes an active form of information disclosure rather than simple information availability. However, these two ways of practising transparency are not mutually exclusive, and they are often complementary. Perfect transparency is not always attainable or even desirable, and both methods provide a means for media to be transparent (Craft & Heim, 2009). The goal of media transparency is not just to de-mystify the news creation process, but “to increase accountability by the media to their various constituencies: sources and subjects of news reports, the public, employees, peers, advertisers, and shareholders” (Ziomek, 2005, p. 23). Such increased accountability is not only a goal of transparent communication, but also its outcome.

Philosophical foundations of transparency rest on the idea that all human communication, including mediated communication, is based on honest exchange, without which society would not be possible (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009). Plaisance (2007) connected transparency to the Kantian principle of humanity, which emphasizes the duty to act with respect to human dignity, honoring the rational capacity and free will of others. Journalists as moral agents must constrain themselves from pursuit of their own interests and desires and must ensure individuals’ freedom by providing transparent information for people to reason rationally. Journalists who fail to recognize this duty fail to recognize the existence of rational human beings.

As argued by Kant (1991) and as explicated by Plaisance (2007), people as moral agents have a duty to respect the rational reasoning of others, not to be polite, but because it is their duty to honor and respect human dignity and free will. Freedom and duty to respect human dignity are interrelated concepts. The lack of transparency, by its very nature, limits people’s ability to reason and, therefore, limits their ability to exercise free will. Hence, by upholding media transparency, journalists uphold their moral duty to honor people’s capacity for thought and the exercise of free will. By compromising media transparency, journalists relinquish their duty to respect human dignity and freedom of others (Plaisance, 2007).

ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY: HUMAN DIGNITY, ETHICS, AND JOURNALISTS' INCOME

Human dignity is a normative concept that implies that all human beings have an inherent right for ethical treatment (Egonsson, 1998). Respect for the inherent worth of a person means respect for the right of this person to exercise free will (Kant, 1991). Schachter (1983) argued that nothing is “so clearly violative of dignity of persons as treatment that demeans or humiliates them” (p. 850). Human dignity involves a complex notion of an individual who is a part of larger collectives and communities. Schachter (1983) argued that analysis of human dignity must be considered in relation to the material needs of human beings, their economic and social conditions within their communities. He suggested that, just as psychological aggression, poor living conditions, such as poverty and hunger, can also be considered as violation of inherent human worth, destroying the sense of self-respect that is important to the integrity of every human being. Bandura (2001) argued that even the highest moral standards cannot function as fixed regulators of moral conduct. Thus, economic conditions and socioeconomic status affects moral conduct through an individual’s sense of efficacy, personal standards, and aspirations (Baldwin et al., 1989). Individuals employ several mechanisms to justify unethical behavior (Bandura, 2001), such as making harmful conduct personally and socially acceptable “by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes, masking it in sanitizing euphemistic language, and creating exonerating comparison with worse inhumanities” (Bandura, 2001, p. 9).

Although little research examined the relationship between economic conditions and ethical decision-making, some studies suggested a connection between the economic conditions of a person and ethical compromises that she or he is forced to make. Pratt (1991) found a consistent non-significant tendency for respondents with higher salaries to be more sensitive to ethical violations and to self-report higher ethical standards compared to those with lower salaries. Hunt and Chonko (1984) found a negative relationship between income and Machiavellianism, indicating that low salaries increase Machiavellianism among marketing practitioners. Signhapakdi et al. (1998) discovered a moderate negative relationship between individual’s salary and relativism, indicating that individuals having lower salaries are more likely to adhere to relativism as their moral philosophy. Finally, Lodamo and Skjerdal (2009) found that low salaries among Ethiopian journalists facilitate such phenomena as freebies and “brown envelope” journalism. These findings suggest that economic hardships may affect journalistic ethics and may force journalists to make moral compromises. To situate the problem of non-transparent behavior among Russian regional journalists in the context of economic hardship, the next section discusses the particularities of Russian regional journalism.

JOURNALISM IN RUSSIA

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's break-up, Russian journalism has undergone significant changes. The newly independent country embraced capitalism and freedom of the press. In 1991, Russia adopted the Law on Mass Media, and the media was no longer under official government control (Koltsova, 2006). Yet, members of the state-owned Russian media found themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, they were still funded by the state; on the other hand, the system of state control over media was no longer functioning (Zassoursky, 2004). Many journalists called it an era of absolute freedom of speech and euphoria (Koltsova, 2006). However, the harsh economic reforms and growing inflation of the 1990s made most Russian media unprofitable. During this economically unstable period, Russian media encountered the greatest challenge how to survive in a market economy (Cassara et al., 2004).

This period is known as the era of media's economic dependency (Koltsova, 2006), during which Russian media engaged in the *kompromat* wars [wars of discrediting materials], a routine part of election campaigns that gave birth to infamous black PR and *zakazukha* [paid news, or paid-for publicity] (Cassara et al., 2004). The *kompromat* wars fed the need for *zakazukha*, securing a supply of information and contributing to prosperity of media organizations. Some scholars argued that without *zakazukha* and *black PR* small regional media would not have survived at the time (Koltsova, 2006; Zassoursky, 2004). Up until the 2000s, *zakazukha* was a "multimillion-dollar industry involving nearly every publication in the country" (Startseva, 2001, §4).

The pervasiveness of *zakazukha* was necessitated by the existing mode of production. Russian media were eager to embrace capitalism and to make money. Although media owners were making money, journalists remained in a difficult economic situation. A discrepancy between earnings of media owners and journalists caused alienation of journalists (Pasti, 2005). This alienation was manifested through the loss of journalists' professional integrity and susceptibility to temptations of non-transparent behavior and other ethical compromises.

Cassara et al. (2004) reported economic dependency as one of the most commonly cited reasons to explain ethical compromises among Russian journalists. In the 1990s, an average monthly salary of a Russian journalist in a regional newspaper did not exceed 120 USD, with about 40 per cent of journalists making between 50 and 100 dollars (Glasnost Defense Foundation, 1997). Some salaries were as low as 20 USD a month (Avraamov, 1999). In 1999, salaries of journalists in St. Petersburg were between 40 and 280 USD, with a half of all journalists living below the poverty line (Pasti, 2004). Miserable living conditions forced regional journalists to accept gifts and to work on the side. Ethical dilemmas were further exacerbated by the fact that journalists did not disclose gifts or payments in their news reports, compromising media transparency.

Recent studies confirmed that journalism in Russian provinces has been severely impacted by the changes in the increasingly constrained political and economic environment (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2010). Regional journalists often withdraw from civic service journalism and redefine the purpose and standards of journalism in Russia as they believe the media should be a profit-generating enterprise, not a community or service-oriented one (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2013). Finally, poor economic conditions of the Russian provinces and the strongly centralized local governments often lead to the clientele-like system of journalism, in which journalists and their media organizations serve regional political and economic elites of Russia (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010). Thus, it is crucial to investigate how these changes in regional journalism affect non-transparent media practices and to what extent financial compensation and economic hardship of regional journalists can affect their professional values and dignity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the conflicting nature of Russian journalistic ethics in light of economic hardship, this study seeks to answer questions about ethics and transparency in Russian regional media by asking:

RQ1: How, if any, does the income of Russian journalists affect their perceived need to uphold transparency?

RQ1a: Specifically, how do Russian journalists assess the financial compensation for their professional duties?

RQ2: Do Russian journalists perceive this non-transparent practice as normal and/or professional?

RQ2a: Specifically, do they consider Russian journalism as having high professional and ethical standards? Do they consider Russian journalism as independent and incorruptible?

METHOD

The data for this study was collected at the annual conference of the Russian Union of Journalists in October 2007 in Sochi, Russia. The researchers randomly selected 250 potential participants (this was the largest number allowed for selection by the conference organizers), who represented the regional media, from all registered conference attendees ($N = 1,095$). These 250 selected attendees were invited to participate in the study by filling out a hard copy of the survey. The surveys were distributed in person to journalists who were attending keynote speeches, panels, workshops, and other conference events during the five-day conference. Journalists were asked to complete the survey and then return it to the researchers directly or put it into a collection box at the conference information desk. The researchers

continually reminded conference participants to complete and to return the survey and to contact the researchers for a follow-up interview if they chose to share additional information.

Response rate and demographic characteristics of the sample

Out of 250 potential participants, 68 journalists filled out and returned the completed questionnaire. The overall response rate was 27.2 per cent. This was an acceptable response rate, which corresponded to the average response rates obtained in other studies on sensitive topics such as media transparency (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). The vast majority of respondents represented regional and local Russian media, covering 31 different regions of Russia. Respondents were predominantly female journalists ($n = 42$, 63.6 per cent), with 36.4 per cent of the respondents being male journalists ($n = 24$). The average age of respondents was 45 years old, with an average of 19 years of experience. The majority of responded journalists were employed by local and regional newspapers ($n = 45$, 69.2 per cent), local and regional television ($n = 4$, 6.2 per cent), and local and regional radio ($n = 3$, 4.6 per cent). Although researchers distributed the questionnaire to only journalists of regional and local media for the study, a few respondents indicated other places of work, including national newspapers ($n = 3$, 4.6 per cent), private publishing houses ($n = 5$, 7.7 per cent), universities and colleges ($n = 2$, 3.1 per cent), non-profit organizations ($n = 1$, 1.5 per cent), and freelancing ($n = 2$, 3.1 per cent).

Survey design

The study used an updated version of the survey designed by Tsetsura (2005) to collect data on global media practices and media transparency in Poland. The questionnaire included quantitative and open-ended questions that addressed issues of non-transparent behavior among journalists. Respondents were asked to record instances of non-transparent behavior along a five-point semantic differential scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always) in six types of media outlets: 1) national daily newspaper, 2) national television programming, 3) national radio programming, 4) regional and local daily newspaper, 5) local and regional television programming, and 6) local and regional radio programming. All of the survey questions included a box for an open-ended response. The completed survey was translated into Russian, then translated back into English, and checked for accuracy before distribution.

Data analysis

The collected data were processed and analyzed using primarily descriptive statistics and a series of *t*-tests. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were

analyzed using the four-step thematic and illustrative analysis, to identify major themes and topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The open-ended responses were read and reread several times to ensure that the meaning of each unit is understood correctly, to create primary categories, and to scrutinize recurring themes against the participants' explanations (Strauss & Corbin). After all categories and themes were identified and appropriate quotes from participants were selected to support these themes, quotes were translated from Russian into English and back translated for accuracy. Illustrative analysis was used when the statement did not compile into a separate theme, but provided a unique example of journalistic practice or opinion. These illustrations were used to elucidate the reported findings.

RESULTS

This research supported the contention that, under harsh economic conditions, media transparency is among the first ethical principles that Russian journalists are willing to compromise. To answer all posed research questions, this section reports the results on two different issue-areas, pertaining to the questions of transparency and ethics in Russian journalism.

RQ1: The issue of financial compensation among Russian journalists

Because data on journalists' income in Russia was not available in any centralized form, an approximation of journalists' salaries was made to the salaries of other professions, such as university professors, accountants, and public relations practitioners. Russian journalists indicated that their salaries are mostly comparable to the salaries of university professors ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.18$) and accountants ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.14$). Responses indicated that 44 per cent ($n = 20$), nearly half of these respondents, believe that they earn a similar amount as do university professors, whereas 34.8 per cent ($n = 16$) indicated that journalists earn less than accountants (see Table 1). Some respondents provided an explanation for such a perception from their personal experience, for example, "I teach at the local university and see that professors earn less, and accountants earn several times more than my journalists" (a male journalist from the Rostov region) and "According to the official rate scale, the salary of the accountant is always higher than the salary of a journalist. The difference can be covered by additional royalties" (a female journalist from Kursk).

At the same time, respondents were decisive that Russian journalists definitely earn less than do public relations practitioners ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.15$). More than a third of respondents ($n = 18$, 37 per cent) believe that they earn significantly less than public relations practitioners, while nearly another third ($n = 15$, 31 per cent) believe that they earn less. Respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with this fact, considering their journalistic job more important and time-consuming: "PR specialists of the natural gas companies, Aeroflot [a Russian airline], and coal in-

Table 1. Self-reported comparisons of journalists' salaries with salaries of university professors, accountants, and public relations practitioners

	Journalists receive salaries similar to the salaries of university professors		Journalists receive salaries similar to the salaries of accountants		Journalists receive salaries similar to the salaries of PR practitioners	
	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent
No, journalists earn much less	11	24.4	7	15.2	18	37.5
Journalists earn less	5	11.1	16	34.8	15	31.3
Salaries are somewhat similar	20	44.4	14	30.4	10	20.8
Journalists earn more	6	13.3	5	10.9	2	4.2
No, journalists earn much more	3	6.7	4	8.7	3	6.3
Total for each question	45	100	46	100	48	100

Source: authors.

dustry prepare one fact sheet in three months and earn 4–10 times more” (a female journalist from the Krasnodar region). The attractive high salaries in public relations tempt journalists to change their profession. Thus, one respondent explained:

The job in PR or for the election campaigns brings good money, and this is not even an additional job. In the regional mass media, this is the main source of income, and many regional journalists give up their job in the media to work in PR (a female journalist from Kabardino-Balkaria).

Respondents also indicated that this drastic difference in income is visible not only among different professions, but also within different media organizations in Russia, depending on their size, location, and orientation:

In the publishing house “Nord Press” [Yakutia, Russia], the most biased and harsh provoker [instigator] receives 2–3 thousand USD, whereas the regular reporter earns 15,000 thousand rubles [500 USD]. A PR practitioner of a big corporation earns around 30,000 rubles [1000 USD], whereas the correspondent for a government newspaper earns 12,000 rubles [400 USD], and the editor-in-chief for a local newspaper earns 6,500 rubles [220 USD] (a male journalist from an undisclosed region).

When asked whether journalists believe that their income is comparable to the amount of duties they perform (RQ1a), journalists decisively disagreed ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .914$). About 70 percent ($n = 43$) of the respondents, who were unhappy with

how their financial compensation matches their amount of duties, indicated that they are employed by local and regional newspapers. The small number of respondents ($n = 4$, 6.4 per cent), who believed that their salary and amount of work are comparable, indicated their employment with regional television, private publishing houses and corporations, and regional or local newspapers (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cross-tabulation between journalists' place of employment and their perception of whether journalists' income is compatible with the performed duties

Work place	1 (Strongly disagree)		2 (Disagree)		3 (Somewhat agree/ somewhat disagree)		4 (Agree)		5 (Strongly agree)		Total	
	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent
National newspaper	1	1.6	2	3.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4.9
Local and regional newspaper	16	26.2	19	31.1	6	9.8	1	1.6	1	1.6	43	70.5
Local and regional television	1	1.6	0	0	2	3.3	1	1.6	0	1.6	4	6.6
Local and regional radio	0	0	2	3.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3.3
Private local media business	2	3.3	2	3.3	0	0	1	1.6	0	0	5	8.2
Non-government organization	1	1.6	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	1	1.6
College/university	1	1.6	0	0	1	1.6	0	0	0	0	2	3.3
Information agency	0	0	1	1.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.6
Total:	22	36.1	26	42.6	9	14.8	3	4.9	1	1.6	61	100

Source: authors.

In the open-ended answers, journalists provided insights into the problem of their financial compensation. One of the main issues is that in journalism “in Russia there is no system in place that allows matching salary to a job” (a female journalist from the Saratov region). Another problem is the existing system of payments in the media, where a journalist’s salary depends on the number of stories. Russian journalists believe that this is not how it should be, “because journalists should receive their pay based not on the amount of words and lines, but rather on the resonance that the story created” (a female journalist from the Altai region). The financial compensation of journalists in Russia may also depend on the type of media and its

profitability, “Everything depends on profitability of the media, but, in the local press, means can hardly meet the ends” (a female journalist from an undisclosed region). There is also an issue of inter-departmental differences in salaries. For example, “There is a huge divide between editor’s salary and journalist’s salary. Many journalists are forced to write under a different name for another publication” (a male journalist from the Tver region).

Among respondents, there were more pragmatic individuals who believed that, before choosing the journalistic profession in Russia, journalists must anticipate a small income, because “journalism as a profession requires a lot of output that does not match with financial rewards” (a female journalist from Tomsk). Another journalist said, “Based only on my personal experience, of course, there is never enough money; however, when choosing the profession, you need to have an idea how much you are going to make” (a male journalist from the Rostov region). However, the majority of respondents were angry about their current economic condition. Many journalists were complaining that they earn too little: “Journalism is destitute!!!” (a female journalist from the Tver region); “Journalists of rural newspapers receive 3.5–4.5 thousand rubles [100 USD–150 USD]. Is this normal?” (a female journalist from the Krasnodar region), or “Local media earns pennies! And yet they are considered to be the guardians of Russian values. Central media (TV) get very high salaries. What for?” (a male journalist from Bashkortostan). Respondents seemed to imply that one of the ways to survive in such economic conditions is to compromise transparency and professional ethics, because “when you have a lot of experience, great skills, and work under death risks all the time, it is unacceptable to earn this miserable salary for your work” (a female journalist from an undisclosed region). It seems that only those journalists can survive who have stepped into the “dark” side:

In Russia, the journalistic profession is one of the most dangerous and unhealthy. There are a lot of threats, a high level of stress, and absence of any restrictions. Those journalists who are bad and unethical can work in this system very easily. Everybody else has a hard life, because they do not earn a lot (a female journalist from the Krasnodar region).

Respondents were not only unhappy with their current earnings, but also aggravated that their current “compensations for the job cannot support comfortable living” (a female journalist from an undisclosed region). “With the money that a regular Russian journalist earns, nobody can support a family and live normally” (a female journalist from the Rostov region) because “a journalist, when he is the only provider for the family, cannot support it, considering terribly expensive airplane and train tickets, telephone services, utilities, etc.” (a female journalist from Yakutia). However, the journalistic occupation is one of the few that allows for creativity, therefore “a journalist cannot do anything else but his profession. Besides, the soul of a journalist asks for self-expression. Under such conditions you will agree for bread and water” (a female journalist from the Krasnodar region).

RQ2: Journalists' perceptions about the practice of direct and indirect payments

Russian journalists in both the local and regional media were generally ambivalent about whether the practice of direct and indirect payments from news sources for media coverage is normal ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.63$) or professional ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.55$). However, 29.5 per cent of respondents ($n = 18$) agreed that direct and indirect payments can be considered normal among national media in Russia although only 22.6 per cent of respondents ($n = 14$) reported that this practice is considered normal among local and regional media. When asked whether direct and indirect payments can be considered professional, 30 per cent of respondents ($n = 18$) disagreed that this is true for national media, while 46.8 per cent ($n = 29$) disagreed that it is true for local and regional media.

The practice of direct and indirect payments is not considered acceptable or ethical by Russian journalists ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.12$). About 29 per cent ($n = 18$) strongly disagreed and 33.9 per cent ($n = 21$) disagreed with this statement, explaining that “[...] any direct or indirect payment for journalist’s work from news sources is a form of bribe. This is not only unethical, but also is illegal” (a female journalist from the Rostov region). However, about 8.1 per cent of respondents ($n = 5$) believe that this practice can be considered acceptable and ethical by Russian journalists. Many times, journalists explain their position on direct and indirect payments in the light of their economic situation, that is, “It is unethical, but sometimes it is the only way to survive. Of course, it is scary, because it may become a habit, and this habit may become the way of life” (a male journalist from an undisclosed region). In fact, many journalists expressed their frustration with the question, giving frantic comments such as, “this is prostitution, and not journalism! This profession is dying out!” (a male journalist from an undisclosed region); “this is humiliating!” (a male journalist from the Tver region); or “if they want to buy me, let them do it professionally. I do not want to be bribed!” (a female journalist from the Krasnodar region). Despite the frustration and economic dependency, Russian journalists still try to uphold their ethical standards, “Even with the most miserable pay, a professional journalist should have internal ethical motivation and not accept bribes, we should assume internal independence from news sources” (a male journalist from an undisclosed region), and to maintain transparency because “a journalist is first and foremost the person who delivers truthful information to people, but when money is involved — truthfulness and objectivity are compromised” (a female journalist from the Moscow region).

When asked to evaluate their professional practice and that of their peers, respondents were ambivalent about naming Russian journalists and editors as having high professional and ethical standards ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .758$). About 24 per cent of respondents ($n = 15$) disagreed with this statement, whereas 58 per cent ($n = 36$) somewhat agreed and somewhat disagreed. Only 14 per cent ($n = 9$) agreed that journalists and editors in Russia have high professional and ethical standards. On

the other hand, respondents clearly disagreed with the statements that Russian journalists and editors are independent and incorruptible ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .77$). About 12 per cent ($n = 8$) strongly disagreed, 49 per cent ($n = 31$) disagreed, and 33 per cent ($n = 21$) were hesitant, or not sure. Sadly, only two respondents were confident that Russian journalists are independent and incorruptible (see Table 3).

Table 3. Self-evaluation of professional practice by Russian regional journalists

	The practice of direct/indirect payments is acceptable and ethical		Journalists and editors have high professional and ethical standards		Journalists and editors are independent and incorruptible	
	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent	<i>n</i>	per cent
Strongly disagree	18	29	1	1.6	8	12.7
Disagree	21	33.9	15	24.2	31	49.2
Somewhat agree and somewhat disagree	14	22.6	36	58.1	21	33.3
Agree	5	8.1	9	14.5	2	3.2
Strongly agree	2	3.2	0	0	0	0
Do not know	2	3.2	1	1.6	1	1.6
Total	62	100	62	100	63	100

Source: authors.

It was evident from the responses that the only way to earn good money in Russian journalism is to work for a large national media outlet, preferably television. “As far as I know, only a very tiny percentage of journalists earn high salaries, the majority [of people] earn almost nothing” (a male journalist from an undisclosed region). Regional and local media in Russia remains heavily underpaid, for example, “in the regional media, the salary is very low, and you need to work under constant stress, especially those who care about the name of the newspaper and journalism in general” (a female journalist from the Tver region). Respondents also expressed an opinion that financial compensation must also be based on ethical conduct of the journalist. “If you want to talk about unprofessional and unethical journalists, then they deserve a small salary. But not all journalists are unprofessional and unethical” (a female journalist from Ryazan).

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to examine ethics and transparency in Russian media and to search for an explanation why Russian journalists are ready to compromise media transparency and public trust in the media. Results showed that given the living and economic conditions of Russian journalists, media transparency is one

of the first principles that they are ready to compromise. Russian journalists acknowledge that they benefit from material provisions from news sources, and, when it is necessary, this information is withheld and not disclosed to the public. The ethical dilemma that Russian journalists face is rather complex. By compromising media transparency, journalists undermine human dignity and the ability of rational thought of their respected publics because transparency is grounded in human dignity, a normative concept that represents the ultimate human value (Plaisance, 2007). If, as argued by Kant (1991), the ultimate duty of people is to act in respect to others' human dignity, then transparency is a must. First, transparency serves as a means to strengthen media credibility and prepares media to better serve citizens and society (Ziomek, 2005). Second, media that are committed to transparency incorporate a significantly increased role for the public in its operations (Ziomek, 2005). Moreover, truth and transparency both are fundamental to trust in society (Singer, 2007).

Understanding the importance of media transparency in society, why would a journalist try to compromise it? One of the explanations lies in economic pressures put on Russian journalists. If human dignity is the ultimate human value that needs to be protected by media transparency, then the human dignity of a journalist needs to be protected as well. Schachter (1983) argued that economic and social arrangements cannot be excluded from the consideration of demands of human dignity. Therefore, one of the pre-requisites for upholding human dignity and human life is the living conditions of a person, and poverty, hunger, and unemployment diminish human dignity and the value of human life. Thus, morality and human dignity are dependent on the economic conditions of an individual. Consequently, diminished human dignity tends to ignore or compromise journalists' professional ethical duty to respect the rational reasoning of others and to uphold transparency. This diminished transparency, in turn, further contributes to diminishing human dignity of others by dehumanizing people (journalists' publics) through deception and by limiting their ability to reason.

It appears that Russian journalists found themselves in a vicious circle. Just as previous studies indicated, the economic conditions in which Russian regional journalists live and work undermine their human dignity, their sense of self-respect and aspirations (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2010; Lowrey & Erzikova, 2013). This study also showed that journalists' diminished sense of self-worth caused them to compromise their professional and personal ethical standards. Russian journalists overwhelmingly acknowledged that their non-transparent behavior is unethical, but, at the same time, it is a normal and acceptable practice. As Bandura (2001) explained, people seek to justify their unethical behavior by making their conduct personally and socially acceptable.

The paradox of this situation is that Russian regional journalists understand the ethical implications of their non-transparent behavior. Indeed, their answers to questions about non-transparent practices were filled with anger and despair. Jour-

nalists realize that their profession has value to society, but the need to provide for their families outweighs any professional ethical considerations. Despite the fact that many Russian journalists realize their responsibility to their publics, the economic conditions in which they live force them to sacrifice their professional integrity and to compromise the principles of media transparency.

There is no doubt that ethical considerations of media transparency are important because of media transparency's relationship to human dignity. However, upholding transparency by journalists whose own human dignity is diminished by economic conditions can be challenging. Future research must explore the economic factors that influence journalism ethics on a broader scale with examples from different countries.

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