

Journalism around the world in the 21st century



**Interview with Professor David H. Weaver — Indiana University
Distinguished Professor Emeritus**

The second edition of *The Global Journalist* (Routledge 2012) is based on the very wide research project involving six culturally and politically different regions of the world. You present findings from 42 survey studies of more than 29,000 journalists working in 31 countries. Explaining the patterns of similarities and differences between journalists in analyzed regions of the world is a very complex task. However, what are the most notable changes in the journalistic roles among analyzed countries, and above all in Central and Eastern Europe?

In terms of changes in the perceived importance of these roles from 1998 to 2012, for all countries analyzed the picture is one of more stability than change. The most widely endorsed roles in the 1988 *The Global Journalist* book were reporting the news quickly, providing analysis of complex problems, and reporting accurately, followed closely by being a watchdog of government (investigating claims and statements made by the government). In the 2012 *The Global Journalist* book, the three most important roles were reporting the news quickly, reporting objectively, and providing analysis of complex problems, followed by being a watchdog of government. In both books, providing access to the public for expressing their views on public affairs and providing entertainment were ranked the lowest in perceived importance.

In the 1998 book, there were only two CEE countries included (Hungary and Poland), and there were no measures of perceived importance of journalistic roles in the Hungarian study. In 2012, there were four CEE countries included (Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, and Russia), and there were no measures of the perceived importance of roles in Hungary. In the earlier study of Poland, providing analysis of complex problems was considered more important than being a watchdog of government, as was true in the 2012 study, but reporting the news quickly was the most important role for Polish journalists in 2012 as compared with providing analysis of complex problems in 1998, and providing access for the public was ranked about the same as providing analysis. Being a watchdog of government was rated lower in 2012 by Polish journalists than in 1998, perhaps reflecting a more commercial and less political journalism in Poland in 2012.

In Slovenia and Russia in 2012, the two roles rated as most important were the same as in Poland — reporting the news quickly and providing analysis of complex problems. In both Slovenia and Russia, however, the watchdog of government role was rated as extremely important by more journalists than in Poland. In both Poland and Russia, providing access for the public was rated as extremely important by significantly more journalists (about two-thirds) than in Slovenia (slightly more than one-third). It will be interesting to see if the actual reporting of journalists in the CEE and other countries reflects these different ratings of perceived importance of these roles.

One of the most important changes in the modern journalism is the process of digitalization which has affected all kinds of media and all parts of the journalistic profession. There are increasing numbers of electronic mass media outlets, and the social media are used for quick messaging about breaking news. Furthermore, boundaries between journalists and audience are blurring. In this context, how in your opinion, how will the rise of new communication technology within media influence professional development? What kind of roles will be fulfilled by journalists? Do you find any differences between the Western world and CEE?

I think the new communication technologies push journalists to report news more quickly than in the past, for better or worse, and this is reflected in the rise of the perceived importance of the role of getting information to the public quickly in many countries from 1998 to 2012. Another impact of the new technologies is to put more emphasis on providing access for members of the public to express their views on public affairs, and this is reflected in the fact that this role was perceived as extremely important by about as many journalists in 2012 as the watchdog of government role, whereas in 1998 it lagged behind the watchdog role significantly. In Poland and Russia in 2012, the role of providing access to the public was considered extremely important by significantly more journalists than for the watchdog role, but in Slovenia the watchdog role was considered more important than the public access role.

Today's journalists are forced to work under many conditions like increasing competitiveness, market reforms, direct or indirect influence of politicians and technological changes. The relevance of these conditions has been changing in the past few decades. Do you recognize crucial shifts of influence from one to the other factors?

The most influential conditions in the past decade seem to be technological and economic, which are related to each other. The technological changes, mainly from the internet, have resulted in dramatic losses of revenue for many news organizations, especially newspapers, which have led to major downsizing of newsrooms. At the

same time, the internet technology puts more pressure on journalists to constantly update news websites and to check the sites of their competitors, leaving less time and fewer resources for in-depth and investigative reporting. The results of these pressures can be seen in declining levels of job satisfaction and less perceived autonomy of journalists over time, especially during the years since the turn of this new century. For example, in the 1998 edition of *The Global Journalist* book, an average of 39 percent of the journalists perceived a great deal of autonomy or were very satisfied with their freedom; in 2012 it was 9.5 percent. In our American Journalist studies, the percentage of journalists who said they were very satisfied with their jobs dropped from 33 in 2002 to 23 in 2013, and the percentage who said they had almost complete freedom to select stories dropped from 40 in 2002 to 34 in 2013. It remains to be seen what effect these declines in perceived autonomy and job satisfaction have had on the actual news coverage produced by these journalists, but I doubt that the effect has been positive in terms of quality and accuracy and thoroughness of news coverage.

The second edition of *The Global Journalist* was published in 2012, more than 13 years after the first one in 1998. Therefore you have gathered more research materials and improved research tools. How do you evaluate changes in the methodology of the second study of global journalism?

The biggest change in the methods used in studying journalists in various countries from 1998 to 2012 was in the method of interviewing them. In 1998, twelve of the surveys were conducted by mail, five by personal (face-to-face) interviews, and six by telephone. One (the Algerian study) was conducted by a combination of mail and personal interviews, and one (the French study) was based on personal delivery and collection of questionnaires as well as mail. In 2012, six surveys were done by mail; three by mail and online; one by mail, telephone, and online; eight by telephone; one by telephone and mail; two by telephone and online; six self-administered; one self-administered and online; six by personal (face-to-face) interviews; seven by online; and one by using all methods. Thus from 1998 to 2012 there is a dramatically increased tendency to use multiple interviewing methods and also to use online surveys, as compared with the surveys reported in the 1998 book, where only two surveys used multiple methods and none used online interviewing. Likewise, in our studies of U.S. journalists, all employed telephone interviewing until the 2013 survey, which was based on online interviews.

These differences in interviewing methods have undoubtedly made some difference in the answers of journalists to the same survey questions and in response rates. On the negative side, there are no human interviewers to probe for clarity and completeness of answers in online surveys. On the positive side, answers to the open-ended questions tended to be longer and more detailed in the online interviews than when human interviewers were recording them over the telephone. Also, we did not find many questions that were skipped, and we did not detect

many examples of mindless checking of responses to closed-ended questions. The average response rates for the 1998 and 2012 global journalist studies differed considerably, from 71 percent in 1998 to 48 percent in 2012, but this decline in response mirrored the decline in response to surveys in general. There was a tendency for the surveys with the highest response rates to be done by telephone or face-to-face. Without using online surveys, however, many of these studies could not have been done because of the much higher cost of interviewing. Most journalists are now online, and can be reached most quickly and economically by the use of online surveys. In many cases, email messages, letters and telephone calls were used to try to persuade journalists to complete the online surveys. Using combinations of interviewing methods in surveys in general has become more common since 2000, even though it adds complexity in analyzing the responses.

The economic crisis of 2008 brought big losses among media, especially the traditional ones like the press. Many journalists lost their jobs and the crisis reduced consumer activity, which adversely affected the advertising market. All of that forced traditional media outlets to adapt to technological and economic changes by cutting budgets or creating digital versions of their news coverage. What is the future of print or television in the digitalized reality? Is this the end for traditional journalists or maybe it is an opportunity for them to become even more valued and needed?

I don't think this is the end for traditional journalists. Even though the numbers of full-time traditional journalists in many countries have been dramatically reduced, there is still a need for those who have been trained in the values, skills and methods of traditional journalism. For one thing, so-called "citizen journalists" (I prefer the term "citizen communicators") do not have the news sources that many traditional journalists have nor the skills to communicate clearly and accurately to general publics. Ordinary citizens may be able to capture breaking news events on smart phones or record candid remarks of prominent people, but this is no substitute for informed reporting that puts events into a larger historical and geographic context. There is also evidence that the agenda of many online news sites is heavily influenced by the news coverage of traditional mainstream news media (newspapers and television). And there is also some evidence from a new study at Indiana University that those who rely mainly on social media for news have a narrower range of news sources than those who access traditional news media sites. Mainstream news media are thus important for alerting people to events and issues that they did not know about previously and for exposing them to opposing points of view that they may not encounter from friends and family on social media. Despite the popularity of online media, television is still the most relied upon source of news in many countries, including the U.S., especially for major events such as presidential addresses and political debates.

Even though there have been sharp declines in the revenues for supporting traditional mainstream news media in many countries, there are some indications that online advertising and online pay walls are beginning to provide more funds for quality news reporting. I am hopeful that some of the negative trends in journalism of the past two decades will begin to reverse course as more people realize the need for credible, informative, independent news reporting and as the economies of many countries improve. In this era of information overload, we need reliable sources of news more than ever. And we need experienced, well-educated, courageous and professional journalists to provide this news if we are to better understand our world.

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Prof. David H. Weaver was interviewed online by Adam Michel in December 2015.