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Monika Metykova, Lenka Waschkova Cisarova

Publication date

01-03-2020

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Document Version

Accepted version

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Metykova, M., & Cisarova, L. W. (2020). *Closed doors, empty desks: the declining material conditions of the Czech local print newsroom* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23467403.v1>

Published in

Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies

Link to external publisher version

https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00009_1

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Closed Doors, Empty Desks: The Declining Material Conditions Of The Czech Local Print Newsroom

Monika Metykova, University of Sussex and Lenka Waschková Císařová, Masaryk University

The crisis of journalism has been the subject of extensive scholarly and public debate. We argue that this debate needs to focus on actual developments on the ground that may be specific for a given society and that have serious consequences for the material conditions of journalists' work. We focus specifically on local print newsrooms in the Czech Republic, one of the 'new democracies' of Eastern Europe. We interviewed local journalists in middle management positions at key stages of the transformation of the local newspaper publishing group Vltava Labe Press (VLP). We first approached journalists in 2015 when VLP's German owners – the publishing house Verlagsgruppe Passau – sold the company to the Slovak investment group Penta and followed up a year later when the 're-structuralization' of the local newspaper publisher was completed. It is not surprising that our case study demonstrates that commercial pressures impact directly on the material conditions as well as the locations and spaces of journalists' work, with the latter ones representing areas that form a crucial part of workplace autonomy but have thus far been under-researched.

Keywords: Czech Republic; local newspapers; autonomy; material conditions; local journalism crisis; Vltava Labe Media

Introduction

Local journalism has been assigned specific roles in democratic societies not only in relation to (local) information dissemination, civic and political engagement but also to community integration, social cohesion and the maintenance of local identities (see e.g. Nielsen 2015; Franklin 2006; Kaniss 1991; Fenton et al. 2010; McLeod et al. 1996; Hess and Waller 2017; Barnett and Townend 2015). However, since at least the 1990s researchers have documented developments in local media and journalism in various democratic countries that indicated a bleak future for these. Declining newspaper circulation, decreasing advertising revenues, increased competition with online media, investment cuts and redundancies have impacted on local news organizations in democratic countries around the world, prompting explorations into the local news crisis in a variety of geographic settings (see e.g. Franklin 2005; Wadbring and Bergström 2017; Rouger 2008).

It has been argued that the focus on the crisis of (local) journalism limits insights into the actual developments and challenges on the ground (for an extensive and vocal critique of the application of the notion of crisis in studies of contemporary developments in journalism see Zelizer 2015). Hummel et al. (2014) argue that rather than focusing on a crisis of journalism or a crisis of media organizations, a more insightful approach is to focus on how actors face the current transformation of journalism in their everyday news production. In her

research on the production of local news in the UK's third largest city Leeds, Firmstone concludes that the narrative of crisis is refused by those producing local news and perhaps even more importantly such a narrative oversimplifies the complexity of ongoing changes in local news (2016: 935).

We propose that changes in local journalism are little understood particularly in the case of the so-called new democracies of East Central Europe. Since the fall of communism in the late 1980s media organizations and the journalistic profession have undergone sweeping changes in these countries, state controlled media were transformed into privately owned businesses, public service broadcasting as well as tabloid press were introduced and a new 'western' model of professional journalism was gradually implemented (see e.g. Sparks 1998; O'Neil 1997; Metykova and Waschkova Cisarova 2009; Gulyas 1998; Giorgi 1995; Downing 1996). Although scholarly work on the role of media in the transition to democracy and the emerging media systems has been extensive (see e.g. Sparks 2000; de Smaele 1999; Gross 2002; Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010), less attention has initially been paid to developments in media ownership and their regulation, particularly at the local and regional levels (there are a few notable exceptions in this respect, see e.g. Gulyas (2003) on changes in print media in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland; Sparks (1999) on Central European Media Enterprises, one of the major players in television broadcasting in East Central Europe; Petković (2004) for an overview of the ownership of print and broadcast media in 18 countries; the autumn 1999 special issue of the *Media Studies Journal* for an overview of regulatory developments in East Central Europe). In the aftermath of the 2007-8 financial crisis the ever declining profitability of local media drove foreign owners to sell their titles and publishing houses which transferred into the hands of local owners, in some cases prominent oligarchs¹ (see e.g. Stetka 2012; Waschková Čísařová and Metyková 2015). Our case study provides empirical insights into the actual material conditions (and their consequences for journalists' professional autonomy and practices) of Czech local journalism following these ownership changes.

Conceptualizations of journalists' autonomy

Although research into journalists' labour, including the material conditions of journalists' work, is a developing field, research on journalists' professional identity (and ideology, see e.g. Deuze 2005) and values and influences on these has a long-established tradition in journalism and media studies. Journalists' professional autonomy – often understood as editorial autonomy – has been explored in relation to the state, political parties and the market in a significant number of studies that address conceptual as well as empirical issues and it has been understood as central to fulfilling the democratic roles of journalism (see e.g. Schudson 2005; Champagne 2005; Curran 2011). In addition to explorations of journalism's autonomy from other societal institutions, scholars 'have long been interested in the individual discretion and latitude of journalists on the workplace level although such research rarely used the term autonomy, preferring concepts like professional culture and/or work routines' (Örnebring et al. 2016: 308). Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) argue that when

studying journalists' understanding of influences on their work, 'predictors of professional autonomy are twofold: comprising journalists' perceived influences on news work, and objective limits of autonomy that exist beyond journalists' perceptions' (133).

In their recent influential study Hanitzsch et al. (2010) proposed a dimensional structure that systematizes journalists' perceptions of influences on their work, identifying six distinct domains of perceived influence: (1) political – influences generated by the government and politicians, including censorship, (2) economic – such as profit expectations, advertising and market pressures, (3) organizational – ownership, management and editorial decision making, (4) procedural – news routines, deadlines and editorial resources, (5) professional – including professional conventions, newsroom policies and media laws, and (6) reference groups – examples of these include competitors, colleagues in other media, audiences, friends and family (see also Reich and Hanitzsch 2013 for an exploration of journalists' perceived influences on news production in relation to objectively existing limits on journalists' work at the levels of the individual journalist, the organization and society).

Örnebring et al. (2016) acknowledge the importance of the systematization of influences, however, they 'cannot help but wonder whether this model also creates analytical/theoretical distinctions that do not fully match how influences actually are constituted in the empirical reality of the workplace' (320). Building on insights from sociology of work and from Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, they focus on the meso level of the workplace and conclude that 'hierarchies and managerial control, or the lack of them, are key determinants of perceived autonomy among journalists' (322). The research on journalists' professional autonomy discussed here tends to be of Western European provenience and uses quantitative research methods. Our objective, however, was to gain an in-depth understanding of the changing ownership of Czech local print media on journalists' professional autonomy in relation to three of Hanitzsch et al.'s (2010) six domains of perceived influence: (1) economic influences, (2) organizational influences and (3) reference groups, in particular audiences that consume local news.

Journalists' autonomy in the context of transition to democracy

Czech journalism's and journalists' autonomy from political influences and commercial pressures has been debated particularly in the aftermath of the fall of communism

as the media's former political dependence was often quickly replaced by dependence on market mechanisms, imposing new forms of control and constraints on their autonomy and democratic performance. With the market being notoriously interlocked with the state and political actors ... particularly in the early stages of transformation, news media have often found themselves under combined pressure from both political elites and economic forces.

(Stetka 2012: 434)

It was in this period that private ownership of media was introduced and in some cases the so-called privatisation of newspaper outlets actually consisted of a takeover by those employed at the given medium, however, with journalists lacking knowledge of marketing and entrepreneurship and – perhaps even more importantly – the necessary financial resources to develop competitive businesses, the media were opened up to investments by foreign companies. The Czech print media proved attractive to German, French and Swiss media companies in the 1990s, with the Swiss Ringier (later known as the Swiss-German company Ringier Axel Springer) particularly involved in the national press market from the early days of the transition to democracy (Šmíd 2004). In comparison,

the major German publishers were hesitant to enter the Czech media market during the initial period of privatisation. They were looking primarily for national media, which in those days either were unprofitable, or already had an owner. Therefore, they were ready to enter only into alliances with the Ringier company, which was fast enough to establish itself as a national publisher.

(Šmíd 2004: 150)

The Czech newspaper market was consolidated by the mid-1990s and all but one national daily were owned by Swiss and German companies (see Sovová 2001), importantly by the late 1990s the competitors consolidated their spheres of influence, for example, with the German publishing house Verlagsgruppe Passau dominating the regional/local market and another German player – the Rheinisch Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft – focusing on the national one (see Waschková Čisařová, 2013). These developments instigated warnings about the nation losing control of the press and undue German influence on the news agenda (see Benda 2007; Čelovský 2001) as well as legislative debates about press ownership (particularly surrounding discussions about a new press law) and investigations into ownership concentration on the print media market (see the Czech Office for the Protection for Competition, decisions no. S110/01-2032/01 of 2 November 2001 and no. S238/02-OK-2222/03-ORP of 24 April 2003).

In 2007 we conducted interviews with Czech journalists for a research project on European journalistic cultures and some of our interviewees acknowledged the influence of economic pressures in the post-1989 market, the increased focus on profits was discussed particularly in the case of privately owned media and one journalist pointed out that economic influences were ‘filtered through’ rather than direct. There was a perception that political influence played a greater role in the case of public service broadcasters, however, an example of political influence exerted on a privately owned newspaper was recounted in an interview (see Metykova 2009; this is in line with findings from larger scale quantitative studies, see e.g. Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). Although the Czech journalists whom we interviewed in 2007 may have acknowledged political or economic influences on their work, they maintained that these did not impact on their adherence to professional values. The ‘filtering through’ of the objectively existing commercial pressures explains why journalists

do not necessarily perceive these as directly impacting on their own news production routines.

The impact of political and economic factors may be less noticeable under the circumstances of routine news work, mostly because their significance is masked by organizational and procedural influences that have a stronger grip on the journalists' everyday practice. Furthermore, journalists might tend to consciously negate political and, even more so, economic influences as part of a professional ideology according to which journalism is supposed to operate independently of political and economic interests.

(Hanitzsch et al. 2010:

17)

However, in the case of Czech local newsrooms – as we show below – it is impossible for journalists to ignore the impact of commercial pressures and organizational influences on their workplace autonomy as well as on their relationship with their audiences.

The changing landscape of Czech local journalism

As already mentioned, by 2003 Verlagsgruppe Passau became the owner of all Czech local dailies through its subsidiary Vltava Labe Press, the company owned over 70 local dailies as well as more than 20 local weeklies. The commercial pressures on the Czech local titles manifested themselves at least since the 2007-8 financial crisis, news production became more centralized, national headquarters gained more power and control over the process and also began producing increasingly more copy that was shared across all the local titles. In addition, local newsrooms were moved to the outskirts of the cities that they were based in and journalists were made redundant. This, of course, resulted in a decreasing volume of local news and has been detrimental for the key democratic roles of local media as well as their contribution to local community formation. Lenka Waschková Císařová (2016) mapped the decreases in local news coverage and increases in converged and centrally produced contents in Vltava Labe Press newspapers between 1989 and 2009, in one particular case the coverage of local topics decreased by 60% between 1993 and 2008.

In addition, these developments jeopardized the close relationship that local journalists have with their audiences, as argued, for example by Nielsen:

But it is clear that people also expect much more from local media than a conventional focus on public affairs coverage would suggest. Journalists may prefer to see themselves as independent – detached – from the community they cover, even if in reality they are highly dependent on it, both in terms of sources for their reporting and resources to sustain the news organisations they work for. Their audiences may appreciate the ambition to be impartial and unbiased that lies behind

the notion of detachment. But they also expect local media to be engaged with the community they cover.

(2015: 11)

In the aftermath of the 2007-8 financial crisis rumours spread that Verlagsgruppe Passau was about to sell its Czech subsidiary and the sale materialized in 2015 when the Slovak investment group Penta acquired Vltava Labe Press. This development did not occur out of the blue, it was widely known that the Czech local titles had generated significant losses. Between 2005 and 2010 the sold copies of *Deník Česká republika* (the umbrella title 'Daily Czech Republic' that comprised all the Vltava Labe Press local dailies and weeklies) declined by 44.5%, the biggest annual drop of 16% occurred between 2008 and 2009 (see relevant annual reports at

http://www.unievydavatelu.cz/cs/unie_vydavatelu/informace_unie_vydavatelu/rocenka).

Over the same period of time Czech print media's advertising revenue dropped by 21%, in the case of *Deník Česká republika* by 12% (see reports at

<http://www.rocenkaunievydavatelu.cz>).

Apart from Vltava Labe Press, Penta also acquired Astrosat Media and the portfolio of the newly formed company Vltava Labe Media includes 71 local dailies, 25 local weeklies and 15 magazines (see <http://www.vlmedia.cz/o-spolecnosti>). Vltava Labe Media embarked on a process of re-structuralization which involved major personnel changes at the top management level and redundancies at newsroom level. It is reasonable to expect that these further endangered the close relationship between local journalists and their audiences, with newsrooms having a limited ability to build local knowledge (Hess and Waller 2016). Although we do not have access to internal human resources data, the company's CEO Michal Klíma said in an interview:

Re-structuralization resulted in a decrease in the overall number of staff, we continue to reduce their number. However, we do more work with fewer staff. For example, we decided to cancel our press agency subscription for local news because we have more people in the country's regions than the Czech News Agency, this means that we do not need the subscription. Our staff now need to get the information themselves but their methods of work have changed. Earlier they created an unbelievably large number of pages, their work consisted mainly of accessing Agency news and laying those out into pages. Today they write their own texts to some extent. And they focus much more on the web.

(Aust 2017; authors' translation)

These measures have proven to be a financial success as in 2016 Vltava Labe Media made a profit of 107.1 million Czech crowns (cca. 4.8 million USD), while under the previous owner – Vltava Labe Press – the company made significant losses every year since 2006 (see Waschková Císařová 2013). According to the CEO of Vltava Labe Media 'significant changes in the organizational and personnel areas that were completed in the past year are

reflected positively in the group's very good economic results in 2016'. In addition, advertising income for the local titles increased by more than 8 per cent (Redakce 2017).

Working in Vltava Labe Media Newsrooms

Our research was guided by the following main research question: How do Czech local journalists understand influences on their work at key moments of organizational change (i.e. the sale of the publishing house in 2015 and completion of 're-structuralization' by a new owner)?

This can be broken down into the following sub-questions:

- (1) How do Czech local journalists perceive the impact of long-term cuts in the post-2008 period up to the sale of Vltava Labe Press?
- (2) What economic pressures do Czech local journalists identify in the aftermath of Penta's acquisition of the publishing house?
- (3) What organizational influences (pre- and post-acquisition by Penta) do Czech local journalists identify as consequential for their work?
- (4) How do Czech local journalists perceive the importance of their audiences?

In order to explore these questions we conducted a series of in-depth interviews in the summer of 2015 and a year later we interviewed the same journalists again. Our interviewees worked in nine newsrooms based in the company's different organizational units that to some extent overlap with the country's administrative districts. Most of our interviewees have worked for the same newspaper (which changed owners over the years) for 15-20 years (the minimum was 11 years) and at the time they worked in middle management positions. We conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews and we approach our research as a case study. For the purposes of this article we outline our findings in relation to the spaces and material conditions of the interviewed journalists' work. While studying the centralizing management strategies of both Vltava Labe Press and Vltava Labe Media and their impact on the contents of the local titles, we became increasingly interested in how changes to the spaces (including their location and equipment) of the newsrooms impacted on journalists' work and how the journalists interpreted these.

We expected that the sale of real estate located in town centres (some newsrooms were closed, others were merged or moved) – as a response to commercial pressures and also as part of the organization's strategy – would solicit strong responses from local journalists as the location of the newsroom forms a key part of the already mentioned close relationship with the local community. Existing research has highlighted this particular pressure point, in the words of an editor of a small town weekly, 'to lack of time and staff is often added the pressure of proximity to the readers. A high street shop front is much more accessible than the modern building on the periphery of town now increasingly common among the dailies' (Aldridge 2007: 159). We were also interested in the material conditions of journalists' work, the company's CEO Michal Klíma's remarks about new methods of work, increased productivity and greater focus on web-based original content raised questions about journalists' equipment and other material resources.

The interviews conducted shortly before the sale in the summer of 2015 made it clear that the German owner's long-term cuts to running costs combined with the above mentioned declining sales and drop in advertising revenues already clearly influenced journalists' work practices as well as the spaces of their work. Interviews conducted a year later confirmed that the cost cutting measures continued under the new owners, these included the sale of real estate, the move of some local newsrooms into new spaces (possibly spaces rented out on a short-term basis) or the splitting up of existing spaces so that part of the premises could be rented out. Compared to 2005 many local newsrooms lost as many as two thirds of their staff (including administrative and marketing ones). The new CEO Michal Klíma's reference to decreased numbers of staff and increased productivity resonates with some findings from newsrooms in the United States, where it has also been noted that despite the cutbacks and redundancies, the amount of work that the 'remaining' local journalists conduct is striking, as evidenced in Anderson's field notes while researching in Philadelphia: 'continually amazed by the amount of journalistic production occurring at the *Inquirer* and *DN (Daily News)* when compared to the other parts of the media ecosystem I studied. Even in their diminished state (and I noted yesterday the shockingly large number of empty desks at the *Inky*), the amount of work happening here is just incredible' (Anderson et al. 2015: 8).

As expected, the location of the newsroom in the centre of the town was understood as a necessary condition for conducting local newswork. When outlining the advantages of being located in the town centre, journalists stressed that they were situated right in the middle of events and close to sources, as one interviewee explained: 'I have everything within reach, this is also an advantage when I am missing any pictures, at a time of a calamity, I can just dash to the spot with the camera and in 15 minutes I am easily back with everything that I need' (Interviewee 5). This is in line with findings from other studies exploring the move of newsrooms, particularly in the aftermath of the 2007-8 financial crisis. For example, in her research on the 2013 move of *The Miami Herald* away from its downtown location (where it was based since 1963) 12 miles west to Doral, Usher found that the central location was understood by journalists as essential for their professional practices. 'The considerations of a news building as an actually physically rooted space suggest just how much journalists think that a specific place matters to how they do their work. They believe that the move will or has changed how they do what they do and impacts the way they cover the news' (2015: 1017).

However, our interviewees perceived the central location as even more important when it comes to a cornerstone of the journalistic profession – serving the public. Losing a town centre address worried journalists as it could jeopardize their connection with the public and also with advertisers (our interviewees were clearly conscious of the central management's drive to increase advertising revenue). It is worth mentioning here that the disconnection from the public is an ongoing issue that journalists face, according to some media professionals this has become even more pressing with increased commercial pressures and technological changes that make journalists more desk-bound (see e.g. Metykova 2009). The town centre presence of the newspaper is also important as a marketing tool,

in those small towns [...] it is necessary to be present. But that presence does not necessarily mean that the journalists would as well be present, like all of them all the time. The presence can mean a building [...] in which classified ads can be purchased, where people can pay for a subscription or cancel it and similar stuff.

(Interviewee 8)

Our interviewees were well aware of the role of the newsroom location in maintaining a close relationship with the community (also in the sense of paying customers). They described how their readers (particularly the older generation) continued to make a trip to the newsroom, either to share ideas for a topic to be covered or to pay a subscription fee or purchase a classified ad (research has long confirmed the importance of a central location and easy access for local audiences, see e.g. Fenton et al. 2010). Increasingly, however, such visitors face closed doors as secretaries and receptionists have been laid off. In some newsrooms there is no support staff any longer so the door is answered by the journalist sitting nearest to it. We should, however, stress that our interviewees were not driven by a nostalgic view of a busy town centre or a historical connection to a building, in fact they were open to moving out of the town centre but the relocation should be to areas heavily used by the public, as our interviewees suggested: 'I could imagine a newsroom even in a shopping centre, just having a desk and an administrator there and the reporters can work in the field or from home. [...] The town centre is empty' (Interviewee 6).

I think that it was suggested that we will move to a small café [in a shopping centre that was being built at the time of the interview] [...] moreover the town centre is really moving over there. So I think it would actually be ideal there. It will all be connected, bus and train companies will have their offices there and what not, the public will be mingling there [...] in the future.

(Interviewee

1)

As mentioned, our interviewees tended to work in middle management and some of them were responsible for negotiating rented premises for their newsrooms. Their accounts of the conflicts with central management illustrate the lack of control over decisions relating to the spaces and/or locations of newsrooms, the lack of information about the central management's plans regarding the sale of real estate and potential moves was a frequent grievance that we heard. This has, understandably, resulted in uncertainty and anxiety over the future and some of our interviewees expressed a feeling of resignation over the future of the spaces in which they worked.

In the last couple of years some cost cutting measures were introduced. The director wanted to save on rent so he moved us one floor up where the room is smaller and cheaper. However, because it is an attic, it could have raised some health and safety

issues if we complained, in the end I managed to agree with him – in a very civilized manner – and we moved back and we managed to cut costs by renting out an office that is hidden at the back.

(Interviewee 7)

It is, however, not only the address of the newsroom that became the victim of cost cutting. The spaces in which journalists work have undergone an emptying out, spare desks that were previously occupied by journalists as well as by support and marketing staff stand empty. This emptying out, however, also illustrates a shift in journalists' roles in the newsroom. Journalists are forced to take on administrative and customer service roles in the absence of support staff (including the sale of classified ads and subscriptions), they are 'chained to their desks' as otherwise customers/their audience/sources face locked doors. It is needless to stress that this shift is detrimental to their journalistic work as the new tasks eat into 'reporting on the streets'. It has become clear very quickly that the drive to increase profitability impacted directly on the material and spatial conditions of journalists' work, however, at least seemingly, the interviewed journalists do not dwell on spatial changes, rather, they refer to decreases in the number of staff. If asked directly, they tended to turn the question about worsening spaces in which they work into a joke such as 'we can play hide-and-seek here now' (Interviewee 1) or relate it to staff losses: 'the more empty desks, the fewer people. [...] And I guess also less of a mess' (Interviewee 4) or in another interviewee's words: 'people left and the desks stayed' (Interviewee 5). We should note staffing cuts made by the leadership of Vltava Labe Media followed at least ten years of cost cutting by the former German owner.

The journalists working in the nine Czech local print newsrooms that we studied face the physical demonstrations of decline – which they can also interpret as symbolic of the declining role of their profession in society – on a daily basis. Usher found a similar relationship that journalists have with specific physical objects and argues that

these objects are less permanent, and the material composition of what is inside an absolute space like a building may indeed change. We see this through the contested way that journalists view the emptiness of the desks in both the old and the new buildings – these objects are a sign that trust in the larger newspaper organization to provide staff for quality coverage has been broken and that journalists must acknowledge the dire state of the news industry.

(2015:

1017)

While the move to new (long-term) premises may also have some positive aspects (e.g. it can invigorate a sense of purpose – albeit a re-calibrated one), the material conditions of the interviewed Czech local print journalists do not provide any grounds for an optimistic account. Material tools, resources and conditions (particularly in relation to online media) are crucial for the work that journalists do, for our interviewees these have been woefully

inadequate for a number of years. They have spent their own money on painting the premises or purchasing equipment (kettles, fans, microwave ovens were all mentioned in the interviews). The following responses were typical:

We had to buy a kettle or a microwave oven so we collected the money among ourselves because they [central management] didn't approve the expenses. [...] I constantly heard 'save, save, save, you can't even order business cards', well, that is quite silly.

(Interviewee

6)

'I brought my chair in from home because the old one [laughs] broke down' (Interviewee 7) and 'I brought in my own fan because the two that we already had broke down and I don't have the courage to ask for a new one [laughs]' (Interviewee 9). The respondents' frequent laughter when talking about the material conditions may have been a way of 'lightening up' a clearly embarrassing and possibly humiliating fact.

Perhaps even more importantly, the tools that are essential for carrying out their work have not been replaced since about 2007 (for those who were actually provided with equipment), 'my notebook battery has died so I have to be near a socket' (Interviewee 5). Another interviewee explained:

We have one smart phone for the newsroom [...] we should all have one. When I asked about voice recorders at the meeting, they won't be buying them because we have the smart phones [...] well, we may have the smart phones but they are elsewhere, not in our newsroom.

(Interviewee

9)

This is particularly striking in the context of pressures on journalists' ability to multi-skill and even more so in the light of online plans outlined by the company's CEO Michal Klíma who expects journalists to produce more of their own copy, particularly for the web, and to become less reliant on news supplied by the Czech News Agency. This lack of material resources undermines innovation and the search for a business model that would enable so-called legacy media to profit from the shift to online contents. It is not clear what the company's vision is in this respect – other than increasing the amount of original copy online and decreasing staff numbers.

Conclusion

Our case study focused on Czech newsrooms that belong to Vltava Labe Media, the publisher of local print titles and a subsidiary of the Slovak financial group Penta. Until the autumn of 2015 the newsrooms had a different owner – Vltava Labe Press, a subsidiary of the

German publishing house Verlagsgruppe Passau – that was active on the Czech local media market soon after the fall of communism in 1989. The financial crisis of 2007-8 hit the Czech local print titles hard, with Vltava Labe Press suffering significant financial losses. The owner's response was predictable, cost cutting that involved staff redundancies, sale of premises, no investment in equipment and training and the subsequent sale of the media group. Some Czech local journalists expressed the hope that a new owner would make a much needed investment but instead cost-cutting measures – referred to as 're-structuralization' by the new management – continued. In 2016 the measures, together with increased advertising revenues, resulted in profits (for the first time in years). Although we do not have data on what the cuts involved exactly, we understand from public statements made by the company's CEO and other top managers that the 're-structuralization' impacted not only on the number of staff but also on news gathering techniques and on news production (no agency news, more original copy, more web-based content but all this with fewer members of staff). It is also clear that staff were under significant pressure to increase advertising revenue, however, newsrooms often did not have support and marketing staff that could handle the task.

Studies on journalists' professional autonomy have long been concerned with the impact of economic pressures which have also been understood as a potential threat to the democratic roles of journalism. Unlike larger scale quantitative studies that we reviewed in the opening section of this article, our aim was to specifically map the material and spatial conditions of Czech local newsrooms and their impact on journalists' autonomy in relation to three of Hanitzsch et al.'s (2010) dimensions – the economic, the organizational and reference groups (in our case local audiences). We should also note that although journalists were asked general questions about influences on their work, political ones were not discussed, this is in line with Skovsgaard's conclusion that

[i]t is interesting that differences between the profit goals of journalists and organisations have a bigger impact than differences in political orientation. This supports the idea that the organisation's commercial rather than political aims should be the main concern in terms of limits to the professional autonomy of journalists.

(2014:

357)

Our case study demonstrates that commercial pressures impact directly on the material conditions and the locations and spaces of journalists' work, areas that form a crucial part of workplace autonomy but have thus far been under-researched. We believe that explorations of local journalists' workplace autonomy require a focus on the location of the newsroom due to the close relationship between local journalists and the communities that they serve and that pay for their product. Indeed, as our interviews (and other research into local journalism) demonstrate, the location of the newsroom has been at the forefront of journalists' minds for some time. They have been discussing its impact on journalistic practices (e.g. the ability to identify, gather and deliver news quickly) with their colleagues

and have also been actively engaged in trying to find a solution to the need to stay connected with the public that may prefer locations outside of the town centre. We, however, note that journalists – and importantly those we talked to are part of middle management – do not seem to be given much control over the location and spaces of their newsrooms, they do not even have a consultative role in such decisions.

The relationship with the public – both in the sense of the generalized public whose good they serve and the public as paying readers – is of tremendous importance to the journalists and we cannot overestimate the concerns that were expressed about the impact of the location of the newsroom on this relationship. We have documented the impact of the cuts to rental budgets and real estate sales and we argue that journalists have seen these as signs of decline and a loss of autonomy although they may try to find a positive or funny side to these developments. The material conditions of journalists' work document further decline and a loss of autonomy. Journalists do not seem to have control over decisions that affect them in vital ways and that both in relation to issues of professional conduct and values as well as to the more 'superficial' issues such as furnishings or interior design. The journalists whom we interviewed often lacked essential tools for doing their jobs and they have been forced to take on administrative and customer service tasks to the detriment of reporting. It is clear to us that under these material conditions journalists find it difficult – if not impossible – to aspire to their professional ideals and to fulfil the expectations of the company's central management.

Notes

¹ In this context we should note the 2013 acquisition of the largest Czech publishing house Mafra by Andrej Babiš who was named the Czech Republic's First Deputy Prime Minister for Economics and Minister of Finance in January 2014 (see Waschková Čísařová and Metyková 2015). Concerns about Babiš's direct interventions in contents published in media in his ownership were vindicated in May 2017 when secret recordings of his meetings with Marek Příbil (editor of *Mladá Fronta Dnes* – the country's best-selling broadsheet) were leaked, see Rohac (May 2017).

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