

FACTORS AFFECTING SELF-CENSORSHIP AMONG POLISH JOURNALISTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to recognize the factors limiting journalists' sense of autonomy and affecting the level of their self-censorship during the last three decades of the post-transformation period. The issue will be addressed two-fold. First, we will analyze changes in the journalists' perception on their professional autonomy. Second, we will examine trends in relations between the political system and media system in Poland since the 1990s. The findings show that in the 1990s journalists were still much more concerned about the political factors which could affect their work than about the economic ones. A decade later they had become much more aware of the economic pressures on their profession, such as owners' expectations and market-driven journalism. In the last few years, however, the constant pressure of ongoing government reforms aimed at bringing the press under tighter political control, as well as the emphasis on 'national' content, has already led to some degree of self-censorship on the part of journalists.

Keywords: journalists, autonomy, self-censorship, Poland, factors

Introduction

A survey published in April 2017 by the Council of Europe, based on a sample of 940 journalists reporting from the 47 Council of Europe member states and Belarus, revealed that journalists in Europe are often exposed to serious unwarranted interference in their work, including intimidation and violence. The survey clearly showed that in addition to political pressure, journalists' sense of autonomy may be affected by other factors, including economic ones. To be specific, privately owned companies may use advertising as a weapon to put pressure on journalists. The findings clearly show not only the threats but also the consequences of that

pressure: that is, many journalists suffer from fear, which frequently leads to self-censorship (Clark and Grech 2017).

In particular, a significant percentage of journalists from Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Belarus) reported more often than journalists from other European regions that they were selective about what items to report (46%), that they withheld information (34%), and that they shaped their stories to suit the interests of the company's editor (24%). As a result, most journalists (75%) are caught in a spiral of fear: the more pressure they feel, the more they adopt an attitude of self-preservation (Clark and Grech 2017).

Yet more than 40% of journalists in the EU and non-EU Western countries (including the CEE countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) claimed that the experience of political or economic pressure made them more resistant to self-censorship. In other words, the more pressure these journalists experienced, the more committed they became to reporting things as they were (Clark and Grech 2017).

Although Poland was among the countries which indicated a higher level of journalistic resistance towards self-censorship, the issue of professional autonomy has been raised since the early 1990s, when the fall of the communist regime brought an end to official state censorship in the Polish media. The term *self-censorship*, however, has been rarely used in contemporary research on journalism in Poland. Most scholars use the terms *journalistic freedom of expression* or *professional autonomy*, defined as the freedom to select and cover topics (Bajka 1991, 2000; Olędzki 1998; Stępińska et al. 2012; Stępińska and Ossowski 2012; Stępińska and Głowacki 2014; Głowacki 2013, 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2013; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a, 2015b).

For the most part, journalistic autonomy has been studied in Poland from one of the following two perspectives. The first focuses on political and economic factors affecting the Polish media system in general and journalism in particular, while the second examines (by means of surveys or in-depth interviews) journalists' own perceptions of their level of professional autonomy (see, for example, Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a, 2015b; Stępińska 2017).

In this paper we will combine the two aforementioned approaches. The main aim of this paper is to identify factors that limit journalists' professional autonomy and may foster a tendency towards self-censorship. In order to achieve that goal, we collect secondary data from two types of sources. First, we employ the data provided by the Varieties of Democracy (hereafter V-Dem) Institute. The V-Dem offers a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy and "provides a multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that reflects the complexity of the concept of democracy as a system of rule that goes beyond the simple presence of elections" (V-Dem, 2020). The V-Dem draws on "theoretical and methodological expertise from its worldwide team to produce data in the most objective and reliable way possible. Approximately half of the indicators in the V-Dem dataset are based on information obtainable from official documents such as constitutions and government records. The other half consists of more subjective assessments on topics like political practices and compliance with *de jure* rules" (V-Dem, 2020).

One of the indicators included in the V-Dem database on a total of 202 countries is *media self-censorship*, measured on the scale from 0–3 where 0 stands for complete and thorough self-censorship and 3 for little or no self-censorship among journalists.¹

Second, we review results of surveys conducted among Polish journalists in the last three decades (Bajka 1991, 2000; Olędzki, 1998; Stępińska et al. 2012; Stępińska and Ossowski 2012; Stępińska and Głowacki, 2014; Głowacki 2013, 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska et al., 2013; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a, 2015b). In some of these studies, self-censorship is perceived as one of the threats to journalistic freedom of expression or as a factor limiting autonomy, along with state censorship and political, economic, or internal (editorial) pressure (Bajka 1991, 2000). However, studies carried out as part of projects originating in the USA (e.g. Weaver and Wu 1998; Weaver and Willnat 2012) do not use the term self-censorship at all (Olędzki 1998; Stępińska et al. 2012; Stępińska and Ossowski 2012; Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2013; Nygren 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015). Instead, they employ a term of the autonomy defined as the journalists' freedom to select the topic and decide how they will cover that topic.

By comparing the results of the studies conducted among the journalists with the analyses of experts, the paper will lead us to a better understanding of the work conditions of professional journalists in Poland across time.

Journalistic Professional Autonomy and Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is often considered in relation to censorship (Kenny and Gross 2008). Firstly, censorship serves as a reference point for the definition of self-censorship: in censorship, boundaries are drawn around what to write or not to write by external powers, such as governments and companies, so journalists or publishers have no choice but to write and publish as directed. Conversely, self-censorship is “the control of what one says or does in order to avoid annoying or offending others but without being told officially that such control is necessary” (Clark and Grech 2017, p. 11). Secondly, censorship is seen as one of the sources of self-censorship. As Marlin (1999) writes, formal censorship provides fertile ground for self-censorship, which is “a kind of penumbra extending beyond the official boundaries of prohibited expression”.

What is shared by both approaches is the fear factor. According to Mužíková et al. (2013), with regards to self-censorship, journalists are not openly told what they can and cannot do, but they censor themselves, hiding some facts which they think would be dangerous to mention. Skjerdal (2010) also refers to practices which are performed for the sake of excluding information because of perceived threats

1 The V-Dem is one of the largest-ever social science data collection efforts with a database containing over 28.4 million data points. The latest version of the dataset, V10, covers 202 countries from 1789–2019 with annual updates to follow. For more details please check: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/about/>.

on the part of public authorities. White (2014) puts it even more explicitly: “This is when journalism and media are driven not by editorial concerns, but by fear”.

Discussion on the factors that might trigger fear usually leads to the political and economic motives of self-censorship. Marlin (1999) claims that these motives vary from the survival of the media organization, the desire to increase an already healthy revenue, the political bias of the media organization, and the desire to preserve one’s job, health, or even one’s life.

Although the main body of Polish research on journalist autonomy is focused on political and economic pressure as the main sources of journalistic self-censorship, Bajka (1991, 2000), offers a much longer list of potential factors in the limitation of journalistic freedom in Poland. While some of these factors are indeed institutional and directly related to the state (political power, political parties) or powerful private actors (media owners, editors), the others refer to the social structure and decentered forms of power (Bunn 2015, p. 39) such as the church, labor unions, current economic and social conditions, or “transformation” circumstances (in the early 1990s) (Bajka 1991, 2000). Interestingly, journalists themselves are considered to contribute to the threat to freedom of expression due to their *self-censorship*, which might be the result either of their fear of losing their jobs, or cowardice, conformism and opportunism. Bajka (1991, p. 156) also claims that some journalists just want to please the political actors in power, while others are reluctant to express their opinions.

Seen from such a perspective, self-censorship can be exercised at different levels: from personal (only the journalists themselves know that they avoid covering some issues) to institutional, where a higher authority in the media outlet rules against publication which was approved at a lower level (Marlin 1999). Therefore, as Cook and Heilmann (2013) suggest, we may distinguish between two types of self-censorship: public and private. While public self-censorship refers to a range of individual reactions to a public censorship regime, private self-censorship is the suppression by an agent of his or her own attitudes in a situation where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant.

In this paper we perceive self-censorship (regardless of its type) as emanating from political or private powerful actors. While identifying the main sources of influence on self-censorship, we discuss three categories of indicators offered by the V-Dem (2020). First, we examine a role of general principles of democracy such as the electoral, deliberative, liberal and participatory approaches. Second, we study factors that are closely (directly) related to the media, namely government censorship efforts, harassment of journalists, and media bias.² Finally, we analyze a relationship between features of the media system such as print/broadcast media

2 In these V-Dem indicators the scale runs from 0 to 4, where 0 reflects a high level and 4 reflects a low level of particular of limitations of journalistic freedom.

critical approach towards government and a representation of a wide range of political perspectives in the print/broadcast media³, and self-censorship (V-Dem 2020).

The *Electoral democracy index* seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance. In the V-Dem conceptual scheme, electoral democracy is understood as an essential element of any other conception of representative democracy liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, or some other.

The *Deliberative democracy index* assesses the process by which decisions are reached in a polity. A deliberative process is one in which public reasoning focused on the common good motivates political decisions as contrasted with emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, or coercion. The *Liberal democracy index* measures whether the democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. It also evaluates the constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. Finally, the *Participatory democracy index* collects data on the active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral. This index thus evaluates the engagement in civil society organizations, direct democracy, and subnational elected bodies.

Indirect forms of censorship might include politically motivated awarding of broadcast frequencies, withdrawal of financial support, influence over printing facilities and distribution networks, selected distribution of advertising, onerous registration requirements, prohibitive tariffs, and bribery. The lowest score in the scale (0) refers to a case where attempts to censor are direct and routine, while the higher score of that indicator, the more rarely the government attempts to censor major media in any way.

Harassment of journalists occurs when journalists are threatened with libel, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, or killed — by governmental or powerful nongovernmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities. The lowest score (0) refers to a case where no journalists dare to engage in journalistic activities that would offend powerful actors because harassment or worse would be certain to occur. The highest score (4) represents a case where journalists are never harassed by governmental or powerful nongovernmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities.

3 In these V-Dem indicators the scale runs from 0 to 3, where 0 reflects significantly limited media autonomy while 3 reflects a high level of autonomy in criticism and presenting a broad political perspective.

Media bias is measured by the attitude of the media towards opposition parties or candidates. Coverage can be considered „more or less impartial” when the media as a whole present a mix of positive and negative coverage of each party or candidate. The score 0 means that the print and broadcast media cover only the official party or candidates, or have no political coverage, or there are no opposition parties or candidates to cover. The score 1 stands for a case where the print and broadcast media cover more than just the official party or candidates but all the opposition parties or candidates receive only negative coverage. The higher score, the more coverage on some opposition parties or candidates and less impartial image of these political actors in the print and broadcast media.

Two other indicators also refer to the way print and broadcast cover political actors. The first focuses on the watchdog role of the media, namely how many of the major print and broadcast outlets routinely *criticize the government* (0 means none, while 3 means all major media outlets criticize the government at least occasionally). The second examines whether the major print and broadcast media represent a *wide range of political perspectives*. The score 0 means that the major media represent only the government’s perspective, while the score 3 means that all perspectives that are important in this society are represented in at least one of the major media.

To discover significant relationships between a tendency towards self-censorship among Polish journalists and the aforementioned variables we run Pearson correlation tests.

Press Freedom and Self-Censorship in Poland After Political Transformation

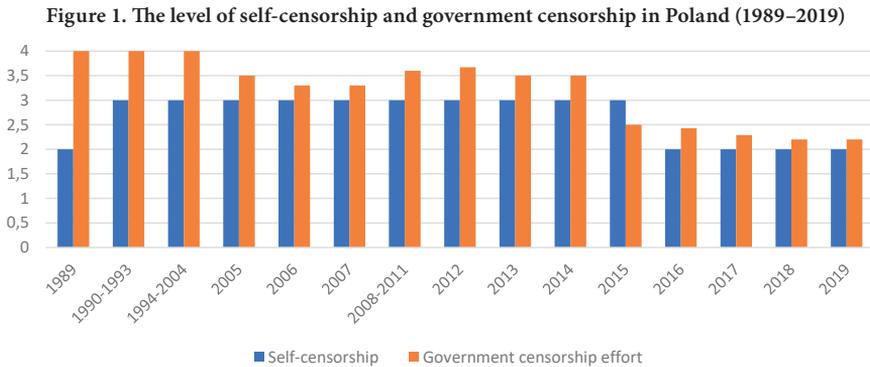
With a *Democracy Index* of around 7, Poland has been classified as a flawed democracy since the transformation period in the early 1990s (EIU 2017). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the index decreased in 2016 to a level of 6.83 and was still dropping in 2019 (to 6.62). At the same time, the Press Freedom Index was around 20 for many years, which made it possible to classify Poland as a country with free media. In 2017, however, the index increased to 34 and Poland shifted to the category of countries with partly free media “due to government intolerance toward independent or critical reporting, excessive political interference in the affairs of public media, and restrictions on speech regarding Polish history and identity, which have collectively contributed to increased self-censorship and polarization” (Freedom House 2017). Interestingly, the index in 2017 (34) was quite like the index in 1993 (30), when the political transformation was still an ongoing process.

Similar observations have been made by other international organizations. In RSF’s World Press Freedom Index 2019, Poland was ranked 59th out of 180 countries, while in 2017 it was ranked 54th. That was seven places lower than its position in the 2016 index (47th), in which it suffered a spectacular fall in comparison to 2014 and 2015, when Poland was ranked 19th and 18th respectively (RSF 2018). Like the other sources referred to here, RSF has been condemning violations

of press freedom and pluralism in Poland since Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, hereafter PiS) formed a government in November 2015 and set about enacting a series of very controversial media reforms (RSF 2018; Szyndl 2017; Frenkel 2018).

The longitudinal examination of the general principles of democracy conducted by the V-Dem Institute reveals that an early stage of transformation period (1989–1991) strengthened all four approaches, namely: the electoral, deliberative, liberal and participatory one. The electoral democracy index increased from 0.33 in 1989 to 0.50 in 1990 and 0.85 in 1991. The liberal democracy index increased from 0.23 in 1989 to 0.47 in 1990 and 0.77 in 1991. The participatory democracy and the deliberative democracy indexes were also doubled in just two years at that time (V-Dem, 2020). All four of these indexes have kept high scores (above 0.80 for electoral democracy, above 0.70 for liberal and deliberative democracy, and above 0.60 for participatory democracy) for almost two decades. Since 2016, however, we may observe a decrease (of an average 0.10) in scores of all of them. In 2019 the electorate democracy index was 0.69, the liberal: 0.50, the deliberative: 0.43, and participatory: 0.48. Hence, we may argue that the indicators describing the condition of democracy in 2019 are more like the ones from the 1990s (that is from the transformation period) than to the ones achieved in the early 2000s.

A similar pattern can be observed in the case of self-censorship. In the post-war communist period self-censorship was total throughout Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland (with a score below 1). In 1989 the score (2) indicated that there was self-censorship on a few highly sensitive political issues but not on moderately sensitive issues. It started to increase in the early 1990s, approaching a level which indicated little or no self-censorship amongst journalists in 2010 (2.88). However, in 2017 the score dropped again to a level like that of the early 1990s (see Figure 1).



Source: V-Dem (2020)

Not surprisingly, the results of Pearson’s correlations showed a statistically significant positive linear relationship between media self-censorship and all four indicators of the democracy principles mentioned above, as well as all other indicators under the consideration in our study (see Table 1). The stronger the democracy

was in Poland in all its aspects, the less eager journalists were to control what and how they are reporting in the media.

Table 1. Linear correlations between self-censorship and selected variables across three decades (1989–2019)

	<i>Variables</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Media self-censorship	<i>Principles of democracy indicators</i>		
	Electoral democracy index	.554	.001*
	Liberal democracy index	.695	.000**
	Participatory democracy index	.544	.002*
	Deliberative democracy index	.823	.000**
	<i>Relations between political system and media system</i>		
	Government censorship effort	.983	.000**
	Harassment of journalists	.966	.000**
	<i>Features of media system</i>		
	Media bias	.915	.000**
Print/broadcast critical	.908	.000**	
Print/broadcast political perspective	.873	.000**	

Source: V-DEM (2020). ** Correlation is significant at the <0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the <.05 level (2-tailed).

At the same time, a tendency towards self-censorship among journalists grows with the government's efforts to control the media ($r=.983$, $p<.001$). In 1989 – 2004 the attempts to censor major media in any way were very rare. In 2005–2008 the score decreased to less than 3.5, which reflected the indirect and limited attempts to censor the media under the PiS rules at that time. Since 2015 we have been observing an even more significant decrease of the score (to around 2.2 – 2.5) with direct but limited attempts to control the media (see Figure 1).

There is also a statistically significant positive linear relationship between media self-censorship and the most radical form of censorship, that is a harassment of journalism ($r=.966$, $p<.001$). The V-Dem data shows that from the 1990s till 2004 the scores of that indicator were above 3.5 (see Figure 2), meaning that it was rare for any journalist to be harassed for offending powerful actors, and if this were to happen, those responsible for the harassment would be identified and punished. Since 2015, however the scores dropped to around 2.5 which may indicate that some journalists who offend powerful actors have been forced to stop but others manage to continue practicing journalism freely for long periods of time.

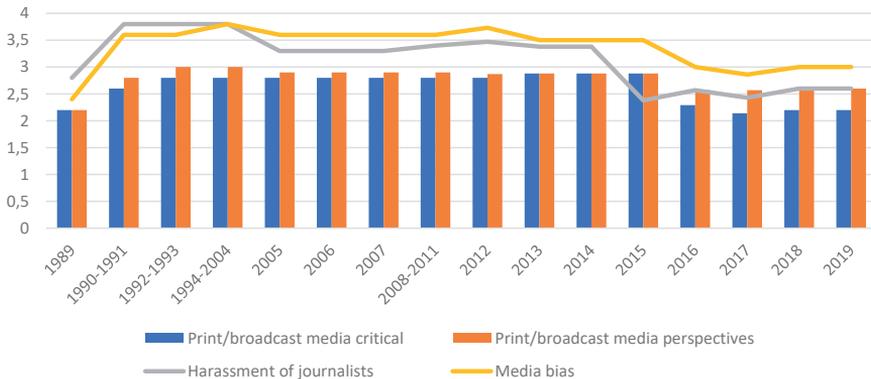
Although the government does not officially censor the media in Poland and there are no restrictions on news production or distribution, and the costs associated with operating media outlets are not prohibitively high, the many personnel changes in the state media (more than 200 public service journalists have been dismissed

according to the Society of Journalism, a journalistic association launched in 2012, see: Mong 2018) has had a chilling effect on journalists (Freedom House 2017).

At the same time, outlets sympathetic to the opposition struggle to remain profitable in Poland since they have lost advertising revenue since the PiS government moved to redirect advertising spending towards pro-government media. For example, advertising revenue at liberal daily newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza” declined by around 15 percent in the first four months of 2016, compared to the industry average of 5 percent (Freedom House 2017). The government’s relentlessly combative relationship with more opposition-friendly media has encouraged self-censorship at those outlets. The risk of defamation suits can also encourage self-censorship, particularly in smaller outlets which could be forced out of business by large fines (Freedom House 2017).

There are also significant positive correlations between media self-censorship and selected features of the Polish media system. First, there is a higher tendency among journalists to limit their own autonomy on selecting topics and covering the events in a more politically biased media environment ($r=.915, p<.001$). In periods when the print and broadcast media tended to cover all newsworthy parties and candidates more or less impartially and in proportion to their newsworthiness (the 1990s – 2015), the level of self-censorship was lower than in periods when the media were giving only negative or no coverage to at least one newsworthy party or candidate (1989). Since 2015 the score of the media bias in Poland is 3 which indicates that the print and broadcast media cover opposition parties or candidates more or less impartially, but they give an exaggerated amount of coverage to the governing party or candidates (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Selected features of the media system in Poland (1989–2019)



Source: V-Dem (2020)

Secondly, the level of self-censorship is correlated with some specific media system conditions. There is a significant positive correlation between media self-censorship and the media’s critical approach towards the government ($r=.908, p<.001$). Journalists are less prone to self-censorship when all the major media outlets criticize

the government at least occasionally. In 1989 some media outlets routinely criticized the government, while there were other important outlets that never did that. One of the major consequences of the political transformation in the early 1990s was the fact that journalists in all the media outlets started to play a watchdog role. In 2016, however, the score dropped to a level lower than 2.5 and remains that low till now (see Figure 2).

Finally, the level of self-censorship among journalists seems to be correlated with a range of political perspectives represented in the media ($r=.873$, $p<.001$). Namely, the wider the range of political perspectives that can be found in print and broadcast media, the lower the level of self-censorship and the other way round. In 1989 the major media represented a variety of political perspectives, but they systematically ignored at least one political perspective that was important in the Polish society (the opposition towards the communist government). Starting from 1990 till 2015 all perspectives that were important in the society were represented in at least one of the major media outlets. In practice, in the Polish media market one could find media outlets with clear political leanings. In fact, a high level of political parallelism and an external political pluralism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) have been prevalent in the Polish media system (mainly in daily newspapers and weekly magazines) since the mid-1990s (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a). In 2016 the score for a variety of political perspectives decreased to 2.6 (see Figure 2).

Journalists' Perception on Their Professional Autonomy Across Years

The systematic review of surveys conducted among Polish journalists provides more details to the general picture of factors influencing self-censorship in last three decades. In 1990, as many as 95% of journalists claimed that the political transformation had, indeed, led to media freedom. However, only 15% had the sense that their freedom was complete at that time, while 81% declared that they “usually say and write exactly what they think”. When asked about threats to their rediscovered freedom, 25% of journalists pointed to the new government: they were afraid that the new regime would try to protect itself by limiting media freedom. Moreover, 20% of journalists named self-censorship as a threat to press freedom. They were concerned that journalists would avoid expressing their opinions about the political, economic, and social changes they were facing out of fear of offending the new government or losing their jobs (Bajka 1991, p. 156).

The features and implications of the transformation period itself were also perceived as serious threats to media freedom: 17% of journalists referred to psychological and professional aspects such as old habits gained under the communist regime (the effects of “long-term training”, as they called it) and challenges related to the adaptation process as potential stumbling blocks for achieving complete freedom of the media. In fact, the abolition of state censorship was one of the main challenges for senior members of many news media outlets, and one of the reasons cited

by those who decided to leave the profession (Bajka 2000, p. 45): some journalists found it difficult to believe in and adjust to the fact that there was no longer a “holder” who decided what might be covered and how (Bajka 1991, p. 156).

In the early 1990s journalists paid less attention to economic pressure: in the era of an emerging media market, journalists were still much more concerned about the political factors that could affect their work than about market-related factors. Around 30% of journalists expressed their fears of direct and indirect political pressure (some of them were afraid that political party-owned media outlets would be launched again) (Bajka 1991, p. 156–157). At the same time, 14% of journalists claimed that the owner or sponsor of a media outlet might limit media freedom, and 10% mentioned direct economic pressure as their main concern (Bajka 1991, p. 156). Furthermore, 11% of respondents perceived the church as a source of threat to press freedom, while 12% thought that social circumstances (including new social and political relations and a desire for revenge) might affect media autonomy.

The rapid changes which took place throughout the 1990s significantly affected journalists’ perceptions. First, at the end of that decade 93% of Polish journalists claimed that they ‘usually say and write exactly what they think’, but only 7% had a sense of complete freedom (Bajka 2000, p. 55). Secondly, several years after the establishment of a new media market, journalists had become much more aware of the economic pressures on their profession related to the process of media ownership concentration, the decreasing number of print media outlets and increasing competition (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2001). To be specific, 42% mentioned the owner’s expectations as a source of limitations on the press freedom (in comparison to 25% in 1991).

However, they perceived it as a factor indirectly affecting their performance, since the expectations were communicated by editors and other staff at the media outlet. Journalists were either expected to look for any inadequacy in an institution’s or person’s performance, or to avoid making critical comments about some public figures by others. In some cases, it was the owners’ political leanings that affected their expectations toward media coverage. Not surprisingly, then, journalists also reported internal censorship (19%) and self-censorship (11%) as threats to press freedom. If they were afraid of confrontation, they usually decided not to cover some topics at all, or they resigned from their jobs in the media outlet (Bajka 2000, p. 55). Political and economic direct or indirect pressure on the content of the media and distribution of the news outlets resulted in submissiveness and a lack of incisiveness on the part of journalists, which hindered investigative journalism (Pokorna-Ignatowicz 2001).

Olędzki’s study (1998) showed some contradicting attitudes among Polish journalists at that time. On the one hand, most of the Polish journalists identified ‘informing and criticizing as well as uncovering “dark matters”’ as their most important task. Most Polish journalists claimed that their duty was to explain the surrounding reality to people, as well as to detect scandals and corruption. On the other hand, most of them did not perceive a danger to journalistic impartiality if journalists engaged in political and economic activity or assumed public roles (Olędzki 1998).

In the mid-2000s journalists started to perceive a difference between *journalistic freedom* (the autonomy of journalists in deciding what events they covered, and how) and *media freedom* (the political and economic autonomy of the media organization) (Mocek 2006, p. 106). Although these two dimensions of freedom have always been interrelated, the journalists' level of understanding of the factors which directly affected media outlets and indirectly affected their own work increased at that time. They perceived journalistic self-censorship as the outcome of social, political, and economic circumstances and pressures on media organizations. They regarded it as "the most destructive form of pressure" that "kills in the bud" journalistic independence: journalists control and limit themselves in order to avoid any potential problems either with the editor-in-chief or the media company (Mocek 2006, p. 294–300).

Such awareness amongst journalists might explain the decrease in the percentage of journalists who claimed that they had almost complete freedom or a great deal of freedom in selecting stories, from 93% in 2000 to 80% in 2009 (Stępińska et al. 2012, p. 263). Similar conclusions can be drawn from the data collected in 2013: a majority of journalists claimed to have "a decisive influence on news production and final content of news items", but only 59% said that they could almost always get a subject covered; 31% said they had almost complete freedom in selecting stories, and 30% that they had almost complete freedom in deciding on the framework of the story (Nygren 2015, p. 138–140).

Despite their general sense of autonomy and freedom at that time, journalists observed a significant increase in the influence of economic factors, and at the same time a decrease in the influence of political ones. For example, 38% of journalists claimed that those advertising in the media have a significant impact on the process of selection of subjects, and more than 29% were convinced that this influence had increased in the last 5–10 years (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a). At the same time, about 52% of journalists were aware of potential political influence and as many as 68% perceived this as one of the most perilous factors in press freedom and professional autonomy (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a, p. 199). Similar observations were made by Głowacki (2013, p. 35–37): while 71% of journalists claimed that economic pressure was a threat for the development of journalism in Poland, 47% expressed their concerns about political influence. All the same, when asked in 2014 about their perception of changes in press freedom in the last 5 to 10 years, 31% of Polish journalists felt that the level of freedom had increased, 34% were convinced that it was still the same, and 26% had the feeling that it had decreased (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015a, p. 204–205).

Concern about the political pressure on journalists increased a few years later when the National Media Council (a new state body established in July 2016) announced that it wanted to underline public broadcasting's *national mission* and enhance Polish patriotism. Although there is only anecdotal evidence so far (no systematic studies have been conducted yet), some scholars claim that the new emphasis on *national* content has already led to incidents of self-censorship by journalists (Szynol 2017). Journalists also seem to worry that when they speak to international reporters, their

words might be turned against them and they might be presented as unpatriotic or anti-Polish in the government-friendly media. For example, Bartosz Wieliński, the head of the foreign desk at *Gazeta Wyborcza* claimed that “They often suggest that we are traitors, unpatriotic, that we are fake news media, and try to undermine our credibility in all possible ways” (Mong 2018).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine conditions fostering a tendency towards self-censorship among the Polish journalists in the last three decades, since the transformation period in the early 1990s. Analysis on the Polish media environment clearly showed a strong correlation between self-censorship and indications of political pressure on media organizations such as the government censorship efforts, harassment of journalists, as well as media political bias and a range of political perspectives represented in the media.

The findings of these analyses were supported by the findings of studies on journalistic perceptions and journalists’ sense of professional autonomy in the last three decades. A systematic review of the survey studies that have been conducted amongst Polish journalists since the 1990s revealed that their perception of professional autonomy mirrors the conditions within the media system. While in the 1990s journalists were still much more concerned about political factors that could affect their work than economic ones, a decade later they became much more aware of the economic pressures on their profession such as owners’ expectations and market-driven journalism. In the last few years, however, a constant pressure from ongoing government reforms aimed at bringing the press under tighter political control, as well as the emphasis on *national* content, has already led to self-censorship on the part of journalists.

The findings clearly show that the level of self-censorship (as indicated both by experts and journalists themselves) can be perceived not only as an indicator of stability in the journalistic field, but also of the freedom of the media. Studies on journalists’ perceptions of their own performance seem to complement the analysis of the political, economic, and social context pertaining to the media: journalists are sensitive barometers of their own freedom and the factors which limit it.

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STRESZCZENIE

Czynniki wpływające na poziom autocenzury wśród polskich dziennikarzy

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest rozpoznanie czynników wpływających negatywnie na poziom poczucia autonomii oraz zjawisko autocenzury wśród polskich dziennikarzy w trzech dekadach od okresu transformacji ustrojowej w Polsce. Kwestia ta zostanie przeanalizowana z dwóch perspektyw. Po pierwsze, dokonany zostanie przegląd badań nad poczuciem niezależności dziennikarzy. Następnie, analizie poddane zostaną relacje, jakie zachodziły pomiędzy systemem politycznym i systemem medialnym w Polsce od lat 90. Analiza wykazała, iż w pierwszej dekadzie po transformacji dziennikarze postrzegali czynniki polityczne jako główne źródło ograniczeń autonomii, zaś w drugiej odczuwali głównie presję o charakterze ekonomicznym. Ostatnie lata przyniosły kolejną zmianę – dziennikarze ponownie zaczęli wskazywać na czynniki o charakterze politycznym wpływające na ich poczucie autonomii w zakresie doboru poruszanych tematów i sposobu ich relacjonowania.

Słowa kluczowe: dziennikarze, autonomia, autocenzura, Polska, czynniki

