

# **THE STATE OF THE PRESS**

An Investigation of Contemporary  
Romanian and Bulgarian Journalism

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I have been interested in Romania since I was thirteen years old. The people, the customs, the geographic location; all aspects of the nation inexplicably intrigued me. In college I became curious about the neighboring nation of Bulgaria, and then with the political and social development of the entirety of Eastern Europe. After a two-week trip to Romania in June 2007, I decided to combine my journalistic background with my interest in the Balkans for my senior honors thesis. It has been immeasurably rewarding.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the situation of two post-communist press systems through the lens of Romanian and Bulgarian media professionals. Using a long-interview methodology, twelve journalists and educators evaluated the strengths, weaknesses, freedoms, and struggles of their media. The participants explained that the press is legally free but not yet professionalized, and that the media are quite susceptible to economic influence. They argued for a more socially responsible press, and compared their media to the ideal of a discrete Fourth Estate. At this pivotal epoch for the Bulgarian and Romanian press, emerging from the social tumult of the 1990s and poised to chart the way of the press for the future, current journalists believe they have a responsibility to pioneer more principled and ethical professional standards.

**\*Key words:\*** Romania, Bulgaria, press freedom, transitional society,  
press professionalism, post-communist media

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## **THE STATE OF THE PRESS:**

### **An Investigation of Contemporary Romanian and Bulgarian Journalism**

Romania and Bulgaria suffered economically, culturally, and politically under Soviet-inspired Communist regimes for over four decades. After the official dissolutions of these governments in 1989, both Balkan societies went through a long decade of transition. Both adopted the free market economic system, both converted from socialist administrations to more democratic governments, and in both, citizens started renegotiating their role with various social institutions. In 2007, the two countries joined the European Union, symbolically and practically bringing them more ideologically in line with the nations of Western Europe (Eichengreen, 2007). Although Romania and Bulgaria are among the least transitioned nations in Europe, they both have steadily improved in the areas of government reform and press freedoms during the 2000s (Glenny, 1999; Gross, 2002; IREXa & IREXb, 2007).

A free press is a vital component of a democratic society. Evaluating the condition of the press is interesting and valuable in its own right – without a freely functioning press, democracy cannot effectively take root – but it also indicates the values and development of society. Nearly twenty years after the fall of communism, and ten years after a decade of turbulent political transition, how free are the Bulgarian and Romanian press systems? What values do these societies (specifically, the media professionals of these societies) espouse for the press? What goals should be set for its future development? The exploration of these questions offers insights into the democratic development of transitioning nations. It also helps illuminate what citizens of these nations expect from their media.

This study set out to investigate the current state of the Romanian and Bulgarian press. In an attempt to consider the specific situations in these countries, I interviewed (via e-mail) current print media professionals and educators in the two countries to explore how they evaluate their media systems. The interview questions pertained to their opinions of an ideal press, strengths of and struggles within their present press systems, and journalist professionalism and training.

Other studies have evaluated the recent Eastern European press in relation to how it was in the past – valuable perhaps in determining how it has changed, but not necessarily indicative of how the journalists perceive it or think it should be. Few recent studies analyze the press based on local standards – that is, through methods that gauge the views of those most affected. Most relevant research analyzes the Eastern European press in terms of journalism ideals or contemporary Western models. Such objective ideals and guiding principles of the press were not ignored in this study; as researcher Kenneth Starck (1999) wrote in his examination of Romanian press ethics, “Without an ethical dimension, journalism may well lose its *raison d’être*, at least in a society that espouses democratic values” (p. 30). But rather than impose these external values on the analysis, I allowed the participants to voice the comparisons between such values and their own systems. In their answers the journalists highlighted issues such as impartiality, fairness, accuracy, and professionalism, calling on their press systems to adhere more strongly to these tenets.

With countries in transition – to new financial, political, social, and media systems – it is important to continually examine their progress and their current position. Despite the criticism of many of the participants, the Romanian and Bulgarian print media industries have already made stunning advances. Their plurality of voices and overt challenges to political

authority represent the new choices and freedoms of the public; their over-politicization and bias has at least attracted an interested audience and brought political debate to the forefront (Gross, 2003). One can not expect the Eastern European press to immediately resemble the established democratic institutions of the West; thus, it must be evaluated in terms of its unique societal situation.

The participants in this study illuminated boundaries between press freedom and ethics, deriding the contemporary press proclivity for less expensive, low-quality content. They explored professionalism and social responsibility, the burden of the free market, and the state of journalist training. Ultimately, they advanced the notion that the press should, above all, serve the informational and educational interests of the public through quality journalism. In this study I first provide the recent historical and economic background of Romania and Bulgaria. Then – bringing together research from the fields of communications, political science, economics, sociology, and international studies – I review contemporary scholarly literature concerning press freedom and ideals, emerging democracies, and other pertinent topics. After I describe the long-interview methodology, I recount the responses of participants and analyze their rather disillusioned evaluations of the current press systems.

Finally, I discuss appropriate future studies to further explore the transformation of Balkan media, concluding that the press is legally free, but that freedom does not necessarily translate to professional responsibility. This study finds that at this pivotal epoch for the Bulgarian and Romanian press, emerging from the social tumult of the 1990s and poised to chart the way of the press for the future, current journalists believe they have a responsibility to pioneer a more principled profession.

## **LEGACIES OF COMMUNISM AND THE STRUGGLE TO REFORM**

### **Economic Context**

Bulgaria and Romania fell under the influence of the Soviet Union after World War II. Communist regimes came to power in Romania and Bulgaria during the late 1940s, characterized by an intense emphasis on central planning and complete state control. The new governments closed stock markets, illegalized most private business, and seized control of all industry (Eichengreen, 2007). Influenced by the Soviet philosophy of immediate industrialization, the governments of Eastern Europe decreased investment in agriculture and significantly increased investment in industry. According to economist Barry Eichengreen (2007), in 1955 Bulgaria invested 39% of available funds in industry, compared to 20% in agriculture, and Romania invested 57% in industry and 14% in agriculture. Neither country had the infrastructure, however, to support a rapidly-growing industrial sector; they lacked a viable free market and stable financial institutions. Eichengreen (2007) stated that the approach taken to quickly industrialize these mainly agricultural nations – concentrating on heavy industry while neglecting necessary textiles and food products – ran counter to successful patterns of modern economic growth. Traditionally, effective economic development begins with light industry and proceeds to heavy; it focuses on producing consumer goods before capital goods. The Soviet-influenced leaders wanted to accelerate this process by investing immediately in big factories at a steep price to the public.

Each country devised a series of five-year economic plans that emphasized quantity of goods produced rather than price targets. Each nation relied on a “mobilization model – that is, organizing savings, labor forces, and raw materials in order to maximize industrial

potential, an effort akin to war” (Eichengreen, 2007, p. 136). Government funds were diverted from areas of public housing, transit, and provision of residential heat and electricity in order to fund industrial growth. Eastern European nations, particularly Romania and Bulgaria, greatly depended on the Soviet Union to supply raw materials and plant machinery, but the USSR itself underwent a financial crisis around the time of leader Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953. The hardship was passed to Eastern Europe as deliveries of critical supplies severely declined (Glenny, 1999).

Ensuing economic depression and mass disenchantment with the communist system led to minor reform efforts in the late 1950s. Because most trading took place within the Soviet umbrella, prices of goods were incompatible with world market prices, and external trading would prove difficult. To remedy this problem, governments instituted tariffs, quotas, and trade licenses, and made an even greater attempt to do business within the Eastern-bloc states. Government planners also lowered targets for output. Bulgaria and Romania were among the slower nations to accept reform, demonstrating a resistance to change that is still apparent in attitudes today (Eichengreen, 2007).

The underlying ideology of industrialization at all costs continued for the next three decades. Between 1970 and 1988, industrial output increased by a factor of three in Bulgaria and by a factor of five in Romania (Eichengreen, 2007, p. 296). To support this growth, the government grossly depleted natural resources and employed cheap, potentially harmful materials (i.e. brown coal). Machinery imports from the West also helped compensate for the lack of technological advances in Eastern Europe. The declining situation of Eastern Europe went relatively unnoticed in the 1970s and 1980s, as the West was suffering from oil shortages and decreased production during that time. Eastern Europe continued production

with oil supplied by the Soviet Union rather than by the Middle East, and its economic position did not look quite as unfortunate by comparison.

Mikhail Gorbachev's replacement of Leonid Brezhnev in 1985 marked the beginning of the communist downfall in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev's initial attempts at political liberalization, such as his emphasis on *glasnost* (free and honest media) and *perestroika* (economic restructuring) undercut the authority of established regimes. Systems of intimidation and positive incentives for workers began to crumble and industrial output fell. To counter the trend, Eastern European governments began increasing wages, leading to higher levels of inflation.

In the face of economic instability, populations grew politically restless. Romania and Bulgaria forced the resignation of ruling communists, and entered a period of political and economic transition. Among the massive difficulties faced by Eastern Europe in the 1990s were the tasks of reducing deficits without the support of stable markets, privatizing inefficient state enterprises, and dealing with the loss of revenues generated by public-sector industry while embracing private ownership (Eichengreen, 2007). As in the 1950s, each Eastern European country responded to reform with varied levels of enthusiasm.

### **Bulgarian Reform**

During the communist era Bulgaria was among the more modernized countries of Eastern Europe. Its totalitarian regimes were close trading partners with the Soviet Union, and by the 1980s Bulgaria was largely industrialized. It also boasted an educated urban middle class and a strong working class. In the absence of significant conflicts with the Soviet Union, which were common in the surrounding nations, Bulgarian political life seemed relatively

stable and passive from an outside point of view (Agh, 1998). In the 1980s, however, social tensions – among unsatisfied workers, intellectuals eager for political change, and ethnic Turks forced to adopt a Bulgarian identity – triggered public political confrontations. The friction between old political parties and emerging ones, between calls for *glasnost* and continued authoritarian repression, found a release in the regional 1989 climate, though discontent had been developing for decades.

Directly after World War II, Stalin loyalist Vulko Chervenkov came to power as Bulgaria's prime minister in 1950. British journalist Misha Glenny asserted that, "Chervenkov did more damage to the agrarian sector than any other East European dictator" (Glenny, 1999, p. 556); his pursuit of collectivization drove laborers from the fields, eliminated personal plots of land, and induced famine in the country. The fall of Stalin in 1953 led to decreased Soviet support for Chervenkov, and he quietly fell from power in the mid-1950s (Glenny, 1999).

Todor Zhivkov, a top assistant to Chervenkov, assumed the position of communist party ruler in 1954. Deeply committed to the ideals of communism, and to moving his country through socialism to achieve those ideals, Zhivkov was authoritarian, but less interested in Stalinist terror than his predecessor had been (Crampton, 2007). In the 1950s and 60s, he focused on agricultural collectivization, economic specialization for trade within the Soviet Bloc, and loyalty within the party. Economic strife in the 1970s and increasingly pervasive western influence (through television shows and audio and video tapes) led to increased public disillusionment with the communist system, and the regime was deemed corrupt. In the mid-1980s, Soviet support for Zhivkov waned, and he stepped down on November 10, 1989. As Richard J. Crampton (2007) observed:

Communist regimes stay in power either by convincing the ruled that their power is legitimate, or by instilling such fear that protest is silenced...by the middle of the 1980s, few people regarded Zhivkov's regime as legitimate... "the fear is gone" (p. 384).

Unlike the nations of Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans did not have strong democratic roots, and as such, the people were slow to regard themselves as influential political actors. The Bulgarian revolution in fact began with the ruling classes, who initiated small changes to thwart mass violence. For example, Zhivkov's minister of foreign affairs Petar Mladenov staged a coup and forced Zhivkov to retire, exhibiting a regime change to the people, albeit a regime change within the same party (Agh, 1998). The people demonstrated in support of freedom, but when they threatened to overrun the National Assembly, Mladenov ordered military tanks to deter them. Protests continued sporadically throughout the next few years, as each new façade of change enacted by the ruling elites provoked further public unrest.

The communist regime gave way in 1990 to a socialist government elected in the first multiparty elections since World War II. The socialist leaders, however, further depressed the economy and did not relieve the rampant administrative corruption (Bulgaria, 2007). Continued political strife throughout the early 1990s and a major economic recession in 1996 led to the fall of the socialist government. The concentration on political stabilization had devastated economic and social development in Bulgaria, and the nation lagged behind its neighbors in adopting free market standards and facilitating privatization (Agh, 1998).

The current parliamentary democracy appears more dedicated to economic reform and efficient fiscal planning, according to the CIA World Factbook. In order to join the European Union (EU) in 2007, Bulgaria (current population: est. 7,262,675) had to implement stringent

economic and social reforms. Currently, the economy is averaging a 5.1% growth rate since 2000, making it attractive to foreign investors, though it still suffers from a 6.5% inflation rate. Per capita GDP was estimated at \$10,700 in 2006, ranking it 87<sup>th</sup> in the world (Bulgaria, 2007).

As Eichengreen (2006) suggested, admission (and working towards admission) to the EU vastly accelerated economic reform; two-thirds of foreign direct investment in Eastern Europe is from EU countries, and by the end of the 1990s trade with the EU represented more than half of foreign trade in the CEEC10 (ten Central Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria and Romania). From Bulgarian perspective, joining the EU was a symbolic reunification with the rest of Europe (Eichengreen, 2006, p. 334).

### **Romanian Revolt**

The most violent overthrow of a communist regime in Eastern Europe occurred in Romania, December 1989. Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who assumed power in 1965, ran the nation with his oppressive secret police force, the *Securitate*. His resolve to pay off Romania's \$10.2 billion foreign debt by 1990 led to devastating economic policies, such as drastically reducing food and energy consumption among the people (Deletant, 2006). He terrorized political and social dissenters, and failed to address growing labor unrest. In December 1989, the government placed under surveillance Istavan Tokes, a Transylvanian Hungarian who published an article about human rights abuses in an underground journal. This arrest triggered large demonstrations in Timisoara on December 16 and 17. On December 18, industrial workers in the city held further peaceful protests; on December 20, they proclaimed Timisoara free from communist rule. Ceausescu fled as protesters flooded the

streets of the capital, Bucharest; he and his wife were captured, then executed on December 25 (Deletant, 2006).

Though he was initially celebrated by high-profile Western politicians such as the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, French President Charles de Gaulle, and future American President Richard Nixon, for his goal of an independent Romania, Ceausescu became obsessed with the ideals of obedience and uniformity (Glenny, 1999). While slight economic reforms in the late 1960s allowed for some privately-owned shops and restaurants and gave citizens the right to build their own houses, Ceausescu's vision of a strong, industrialized nation involved heavy government control of the economy. As his reign continued, his policies increased in their stringency. For example, limits were set on per capita consumption to combat food shortages from 1982-85, women were required to undergo monthly gynecological exams and to conceive as frequently as possible in 1984 to increase the national birthrate, and households were allowed two hours of gas per day in 1987 (Glenny, 1999). Authoritarianism had deeply pervaded both the public and private sectors.

Throughout the communist period, public resistance to communist rule was rare, earning the Romanian people the reputation of being submissive. Possible reasons for this perceived passivity included: the absence of a tradition of working-class activism in agricultural Romania; the failure of the media to report resistance and thereby encourage more; the dominance of the obedience-preaching Orthodox Church; and the efficiency of the *Securitate* (Deletant, 2006). However, completely dismissing resistance movements would be giving a false impression of the political climate. Ceausescu was a strongly disliked ruler.

As early as 1949, two years after the formation of a Communist People's Republic, the United States Central Intelligence Agency was contracting Romanian partisans to sabotage

communist efforts and work as spies for the West. The first major collective protests took place in October 1956, as students and workers called for improved labor conditions and a change to school curriculum. The government responded with a wage minimum and the removal of compulsory Russian courses at universities. The next major protest did not occur until 1977, when miners went on strike after legislation raised the retirement age and suspended disability pensions. The following day the government declared the mine a “restricted area” and the *Securitate* began an investigation of the miners. Isolated miner strikes and student demonstrations continued in the 1980s, but the government granted no significant concessions (Deletant, 2006).

According to Dennis Deletant (2006), there were also several cases of individual resistance, significant because they lacked the support of the masses. Silviu Brucan, at one time an editor of a party daily, the Romanian ambassador to the US, and the ambassador to the UN, invited two Western journalists to his house in November 1987 and gave them a prepared statement alerting Ceausescu, and the public, to a looming political crisis. Doina Cornea, a university lecturer who was dismissed in September 1983 for quoting Western philosophic texts, broadcast a series of open letters to the dictator on Radio Free Europe between 1982 and 1987 (Deletant 2006). Writer Paul Goma published a letter in 1977 condemning human rights violations and was arrested and expelled from the country. He had tried to influence Ceausescu to sign a declaration of solidarity with Charter 77, an initiative in Czechoslovakia calling for the government to respect human rights provisions of various international documents, including the Helsinki Accords of 1975 (McDermott & Stibbe, 2006; Deletant, 2006; Glenny, 1999).

Despite the bloody revolt against communism, the government remained in the hands of former communists until 1996, during which time economic reform was slow. The year 2000 marked the end of a three-year recession in Romania (current population: est. 22,246,862), due in large part to strong demand in EU export markets. The economy grew at 6.4% in 2006, the strongest in the last decade, and the country joined the EU in 2007. The per capita GDP is estimated at \$9,100, placing Romania 94<sup>th</sup> in the world (Romania, 2007).

The political tumult of the 20<sup>th</sup> century disrupted Bulgarian and Romanian economic systems, social structures, and civil liberties. It debased the institution of the press, a critical component of a stable society that can help secure public freedoms. Paradoxically, however, the press can advance community liberties only when it possesses a modicum of freedom itself.

## **FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**

### **Historical Development**

Research suggests that the ideal function of the press is in a Fourth Estate role – an independent watchdog of government and society, adding stability to a nation through free public expression and political questioning (McNair, 1994; Holm, 2003). Countries in transition may strive to emulate Western liberal pluralism, in which the media is controlled by the free market rather than by the government, as the path to such critical press freedom. Freedom of the press “is everywhere declared as the legal foundation of the new democratic system” (Splichal, 1992, p. 5); it is the benchmark of change in a post-communist society, no matter how superficial. Referencing ideals of objectivity and autonomy, journalists in independent media systems have defined their role in terms of professionalism, social responsibility, and a duty to inform (Starck, 1999). They are accountable to the public, rather than to the political leaders.

The tumultuous pasts of Bulgarian and Romanian media involve a press struggling against institutional oppression, invoking their duty to represent the public. On the eve of Romanian unification in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the press put forth socio-political debates to readers, and continued to publish in the face of official censorship and suspension (Gross, 1988). March 1862 saw the first national press laws announcing the rights of the press to freely express ideas, and the rights of any citizen to publish a newspaper. Shortly after, the first organization of journalists was founded, and it began to define the profession by codes of ethics and social responsibilities. Between World Wars I and II, newspapers were a forum for open debate, numbers of publications grew substantially (from 1,090 in 1923 to 2,300 in

1936), and journalist associations flourished (Gross, 1988, pp. 12-13). The onset of Communism quashed such unregulated public debate, but the precedent of a vocal, vibrant press had been established.

Bulgaria saw similar proclamations of press freedom (Ognianova & Scott, 1997). Even under communist rule, the constitutions of 1947 and 1971 decreed freedom of speech and of the press – though ‘freedom’ was interpreted within the context of fulfilling a government-designated role. (Nikolchev, 1997). After the fall of the Communist leadership, publications worked to quickly break ties with partisan groups and owners, seeing them as antithetical to the free press ideal.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Soviet Union itself embarked on a process of public disclosure and critical debate. New leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the notion of *glasnost* – “the opening up of Soviet history and contemporary affairs to public scrutiny and debate” to achieve *perestroika* – the reform of Soviet society and economy (McNair, 1994, p. 115). His government led by example, encouraging the media to uncover truths of Stalinism and embrace a new, open role in society. Soon after, the public itself began to challenge communist ideals and critique government hegemony. This move towards press empowerment (and dependence on the press to advance the interests of the people) was so ground-breaking that wary Bulgarian leaders condemned the reprint of Soviet articles in Bulgarian newspapers (Nikolchev, 1997).

During the years of communism in Eastern Europe, the media played a critical political role in disseminating regime propaganda. Totalitarian rulers recognized the influential power of the press, and some of the first formal journalist training programs and schools were established by the communist regimes (Hiebert & Gross, 2003). Because the

party press was a pivotal actor in the perpetuation of communism, the media today has to overcome the stigma of working for the government in order to gain readers' trust.

### **The Challenge of Objectivity**

Historically, press ideals have been rooted in notions of objectivity and independence. This "American model" reveres journalist neutrality and balanced opinions in news coverage (Vultmer, 2006). Reported facts are supposed to be true, not biased or sensationalized, and the journalist's duty is to inform readers' so that they can make their own judgments. But the press should not be considered as impartial and above cultural ideologies; rather, it is steeped in the social realities of its time and therefore necessarily subjective. In a book about political communication, scholar Ralph Negrine asserted that the press should reflect public concerns. In an increasingly fragmented society, the press needs to voice public opinion in order to spur a national conversation. And in order to truly serve the public, Negrine argued, the press must necessarily subjectively decide how to best inform that public.

Making information public is not the same as making a judgment about its truthfulness and its validity. To point to managerial incompetence as opposed to shop-floor difficulties is simply to add to the debate another contributory piece of information. For the media the real problem may lie in not being able to pass judgment on the quality and validity of the information presented to, and by, them (Negrine, 1996, pp. 15-16).

In a transitional government and social system, journalists may resent constraints of supposed "objectivity" rendered impossible by community instabilities (Carpentier, 2007). Journalists view themselves as actors in promoting social change, and therefore incorporate narrative and opinion into their articles. Notably, the convention of infusing articles with

opinion is also common in the Western European press, but those press systems incorporate a higher degree of professionalism overall (Hiebert & Gross). In the pre-communist tradition throughout Europe, journalism was a craft, and journalists approached their work as artists with a subjective social purpose. In the post-communist reality of Bulgaria and Romania, many journalists re-embraced that role.

The press within transitioning systems faces the challenge of developing as an institution while other societal institutions are also in flux. Journalistic ethics may not be established because general community ethics do not yet exist (Carpentier, 2007). Principles of press objectivity and neutrality pale when the public does not enjoy basic human rights and freedoms. Furthermore, as Silvio Waisbord (2006) explained in his essay about transitioning Latin American nations, “a journalistic consensus was unthinkable given the absence of a broader political and economic consensus” (p. 81).

If we take the US experience in the post-war period, for example, a consensus about fundamental journalistic principles was possible only when a wider consensus existed on key political (liberal democracy, individualism, global supremacy) and economic (free-market capitalism) issues (Waisbord, 2006, p. 81).

When consensus of the press does exist in transitioning systems, it is often because journalists as a collective whole have an agenda to advance. Through much of the 1990s the Russian press offered loyalty to the regime in exchange for political protection. The journalists, accustomed to authoritarian control, maintained that information was a privilege rather than a right. They claimed that in order to promote democracy, they needed to stifle critics and cooperate with a government that could at any time obstruct press freedom and, thus, the transition to a free electoral democracy (de Smaele, 2006). Similarly, in Spain,

during the period of democratic transition 1975-1978, the press agreed to grant amnesty to all authorities of the fallen dictatorship and to members of violent opposition groups. It emphasized the democratic values of amnesty, liberty, and autonomy. Different news outlets did voice varying opinions about the reform; however, the press overwhelmingly worked with the politicians to transform society. Journalists justified this subjective presentation of reality as a means to a collective objective – the foundation of a free democratic society (Barrera & Zugasti, 2006). When the surrounding social institutions lack stability, the press cannot be expected to come to an agreement about its professional role in society. Rather, press outlets will selectively interpret their duties of how they can best serve their transitioning society.

### **Achieving Press Credibility**

The key to a critical and stable press is an emergent civil society – that is, a society characterized by an active, engaged public rather than by a dominant government presence (Splichal, 1992). Political critic D. W. Lovell describes how this idea was central to the establishment of a post-communist society:

In the 1989 revolutions, the slogan ‘civil society’ summed up the demand that the attempted integration of all aspects of life in one unified human existence – an attempt that was both integral to the communist vision and had become a caricature in the shape of an all-intrusive state – be ended...It esteems civility, trust, respect and tolerance in relations between people (2001, pp. 28-29).

In civil societies the people, not the government, drive change. They recognize separate political, economic, and social spheres; although sometimes overlapping, one does not dominate all others, as past authoritarian governments had. While civil society supports free

media, the media play a pivotal role in facilitating such a society (Taylor & Napoli, 2003). A liberated, accessible press empowers the public – at least symbolically the people feel a break from government hegemony and control (Splichal, 1992). Such a press is a starting point for seeking freedoms in other aspects of life.

But independent media cannot positively affect society until they gain the trust of the public. After decades of a governmental puppet press, this trust is earned gradually. An ongoing study (1998-2002) of public perceptions of the press in two large cities of Bosnia (formerly part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) found that in both cities, credibility of political media has declined, while credibility of independent outlets has either improved or remained stable. Political media are viewed as decreasingly important, while independent media have experienced no change (Taylor & Napoli, 2003).

In Bulgaria in the early 1990s, the public employed a strategy of “triangulating for the truth,” in which readers looked at several extreme accounts of an event and inferred what actually took place (Ognianova & Scott, 1997, p. 378). Fifty-six percent of Bulgarians in 1996 did not trust the impartiality of the state media, and only nine percent looked to the written press for their news (Open Media Research Institute, 1996). The post-communist public lived with the legacy of supreme state power, always wary that the government would again seize control of the media and punish attempts at free expression (McNair, 1994). Communism, in fact, consciously promoted distrust among the people, teaching them to rely only on a government whose corruption betrayed them (Lovell, 2001). The public must gain faith in the government, and trusting the press is a critical step towards trusting other institutions.

But it is crucial to acknowledge that the Eastern European press is not alone in its struggle to gain public support. Even in established Western democracies the press often lacks

the expressed respect of the public. For example, in Denmark, “journalist” is ranked among the jobs with the least professional esteem; a 1997 survey found that five percent of the population respects journalists (as reported in Holm, 2003, p. 121). British journalists are also ranked as having the lowest level of professional esteem, and the profession is among the least expected to tell the truth (Esser, 2003, p. 210). Despite that reputation, young people in the aforementioned countries are flocking to the press industry – by the end of the 1990s journalism was the most popular post-university career choice in Great Britain, and thousands of aspiring journalists were competing for few open spots (Esser, 2003). In Denmark, positions within the press are high-paying and highly coveted (Holm, 2003). It may be argued that because the press’s professional duties are (worldwide) precariously defined, the public is reluctant to confer its trust.

However, neither ‘professionalism’ nor ‘trust’ can be conclusively characterized. Prefacing his discussion of the Latin American press, Waisbord (2006) said that trust can not be analyzed in terms of a professional model of journalism, in which the most trustworthy press is objective, fair, and abiding by a set code of ethics.

The shortcoming of this position is not its promotion of a specific journalist model, but rather its incapacity to understand that trust is a relational process between journalists and audiences. Trust is vastly more complicated than whether journalists observe any given set of “professional” norms. It is an issue of whether journalism actually meets social expectations, expectations that do not neatly fit a conventional model of journalism that fundamentally assigns to the press the role of providing factual information that citizens need to live in a democracy (p. 78).

According to Waisbord, the press can attempt to garner trust through journalism of information – presenting objective facts, avoiding politics, writing reasoned and complete articles – or through journalism of opinion – reinforcing public opinion, editorializing from a point of view consistent with the readers’. While a degree of objectivity in reporting facts is desirable, the public often trusts the publications with which it identifies and agrees.

There exists a tension when comparing the American ideal (but not necessarily the reality) of a fair press in a stable society with the press in transitioning nations. Trust is not a detached value, but rather is subjectively defined by each relevant public. Therefore, a lack of trust in or respect for the press does not necessarily correlate with the level of press professionalism. In fact, a 2005 Harris Interactive poll showed that 62 percent of Americans did not trust the press – a press often used as a benchmark of professionalism (Harris Interactive, 2005).

### **Free-Market Effects**

In the now-famous *Four Theories of the Press*, Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm organized world media systems into four categories: Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soviet Communist, and Social Responsibility, by. (1956). In an *authoritarian* society, the press is controlled by the government – the few men of the society who know the ‘truth’ – though it may be operated by private owners who are loyal to the government. The press is not a critic of the government, but a puppet of the regime that controls its funding and dictates its editorial stance. The *Libertarian* theory espouses the opposite, that the public is rational and able to determine the truth itself. Press is the public’s vehicle to monitor the government; as such, the press is necessarily its own institution, separate from the

government. As media owners became more powerful and the industry became increasingly concentrated, the *Social Responsibility* theory developed, stating that the media's power entails a certain responsibility. The media must fairly present all sides of an issue so that the public can make an informed choice. The *Soviet Communist*-style government, however, believes that a free-market, profit-driven press is hampered by financial interests; only the tightly controlled party press is free to speak the truth. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, the media is state-controlled, used to sanction the superiority of the party and educate the masses.

It can be inferred that the Eastern European states fit into both the Authoritarian and Soviet Communist theories until the late 1980s (according to Siebert et al, the latter category is simply a development of the former); media was quite absolutely controlled by a government that claimed to know the truth and act in the interests of the public. In the early 1990s, Paul S. N. Lee (1993) introduced a new framework of analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> century based on the assumption that all nations were headed towards a capitalist economy. Press systems were evaluated based on the nation's present level development. Eastern European press was situated within delayed social capitalism. In their immediate post-communist states, these nations were steeped in poverty and not yet free of government control in the realms of press, economy, and public services (Lee, 1993, p. 199). This categorization implies a new world order, in which capitalism is the culmination of economic development. Reverence of a free market certainly has implications for press freedom, pluralism, and professionalism.

The notions of democracy and capitalism have, based on many Western models, become inevitably linked. To promote the social freedoms of democracy is to invite the economic free market (Lee, 1993). However, along with the free market comes a 'survival of

the fittest' mentality; with regards to the press, only the wealthiest publications endure (Ognianova & Scott, 1997). Immediately after the fall of communism, Eastern European states experienced a surge of publications and journalists: by 1993, Bulgaria sported 928 newspapers (up from 17 in 1989) and 777 magazines (Nikolchev, 1997). The Journalists' Society of Romania documented 2060 accredited journalists in 1989 and 6909 journalists in 1992 (Coman, 2004).

The public embraced liberalization of the press, but the free market hindered true pluralism of ideas: only the profitable ideas persevered. This led to sensationalism and a new tabloid culture in the press (Gulyas, 2003). Bulgarian journalists would sometimes knowingly alter the facts to write stories more interesting than those of the competition (Ognianova & Scott, 1997). The 'good story' is not the same as good journalism, emphasized Negrine (1996).

Where the former puts forward seeming certainties, the latter emphasizes the complexity of the social world; where the former goes for impact, the latter contributes to knowledge...The search for news appears, therefore, to be contrary to the search for information. Newspapers may be adequate for the first purpose – and their readers expect no more – but less so for the second (p. 13).

By this definition, 'news' is interesting, infused with meaning and interpretation, and easily digested by readers. Is this the role that readers expect of their press? Is this execution of journalism that the public needs and wants? One assumption of this present study is the conviction that a press system should be evaluated based on societal standards; however, it takes into account the scholarly opinion that the purpose of the press is to serve the public interest and disseminate knowledge to the public, not simply

to entertain the public (Voltmer & Schmitt-Beck, 2006). Serving the needs of the public is a critical disparity between a free press and the press system that existed under communism.

Under communism, the government viewed the press as a crucial propaganda instrument and therefore subsidized it. The lack of funding for independent outlets, coupled with a steep price increase in materials and publication costs due to free market mechanisms, doomed many of the upstart newspapers and magazines (Splichal, 1992). Advertising, a primary source of revenue for Western media, was not immediately a feasible option in an economically-struggling Eastern Europe (Nikolchev, 1997). Some publications were saved by international intervention, as private investors and international media groups have invested money in training programs and resources for the Eastern and Central European press (Taylor & Napoli, 2003; Splichal, 1992).

### **Power and the Press**

Despite the economic and lingering political obstacles to free press, the print media in Eastern Europe have made significant advances since the fall of Communism. Journalists embraced the opportunity to separate from strict government control, and recognized the critical role of the press in an emerging democracy. A majority of the press was granted near-complete independence in the 1990s, although the government continued to manage certain media outlets, such as textbook publishers and some daily newspapers (Hall, 1997; Gulyas, 2003).

In many instances, the private press has enthusiastically criticized government policies and political leaders. Romanian journalists aggressively questioned the legitimacy of the

government succeeding Ceausescu, casting doubt on its means of coming to power during the revolution (Hall, 1997). In a substantial scandal in 1991, a Bulgarian newspaper published a list of 33 members of Parliament accused of being Communist Secret Police informants. (This sparked a restrictive – but not enforced – resolution regarding publishing state secrets. The press stood by its right to inform the public [Ognianova & Scott, 1997].) The post-communist public called for openness from the government, facilitated by the press.

A more tangible aspect of independent press development was the increased specialization of publications. Newspapers began to represent a variety of political associations, and magazines catered to certain interests and demographics (Nikolchev, 1997). This expansion was mutually beneficial for the public, craving niche publications, and for the increasingly-commercialized press. The most profitable magazines were women's titles and pornographic magazines.

Yet this new entertainment aspect of the media is also an obstacle to a free, informative press. Commercialization shifted the focus of the press towards market share and profit – away from socially responsible political, social, and cultural duties (Gulyas, 2003). In an analysis of the post-communist press as compared to that under communism, Agnes Gulyas (2003) notes that communist print media were dominated by politics, with a homogenous approach to news meant to reinforce the validity and power of the government. The new market-driven media, however, are dominated by commercial aims, and a need to make money in a struggling society (p. 83). One could argue that although the press operates largely outside the jurisdiction of the government, it still does not reliably present a diversity of opinion and information.

With the newfound opportunity to enter the media, the print market became highly saturated with publications. The segmented magazine sector tended to be more competitive and diverse, but the newspaper industry also experienced an influx of commercialized publications spurred by market forces (Gulyas, 2003). Ownership changed often, and mergers throughout the 1990s consolidated press outlets. While privatization is viewed as crucial to Western civil society, in post-communist Europe private ownership – at least in the first years after the fall – can be another means of controlling political power (Splichal, 1992). Because of the absence of a middle class in the early 1990s, the press remained in the hands of the elite, and ‘the people’ still lacked a voice. Mihai Coman (2004) suggested that within the journalistic profession itself exists a hierarchy of “media bourgeoisie” and “media proletariat.” Journalists who entered and attempted to redefine the industry immediately after the fall regard the press as ‘theirs.’ Under pretences of helping the nation transition from communism to stability, they focused on retaining control of their field. Coman argued that many journalists do not strive to create a Western-style system of free media, but rather seek continued dominance of an elite press, thereby rejecting codes of ethics or models of reporting.

Beyond the commercialized or corrupt obstacles to free press lie the ingrained legacies of communism. The public still lives with a degree of fear of the power of the government and the threat that new freedoms could be rescinded at any time (Hall, 1997; McNair, 1994). Hall (1997) alleged that many Romanian press outlets have conspired to give false accounts of the 1989 revolution. A press that is notably vocal and critical of the government, it defended the *Securitate*’s role in the revolution.

Among the international community, it is accepted that top party leaders toppled Ceausescu in order to obtain stronger positions in the government. The resulting government of Ion Iliescu was largely a continuation of the old government, formed by old-rule communists rather than forced by the masses, and continued to employ *Securitate* terror techniques against opponents (Agh, 1998). (The regime press maintains that an international conspiracy ousted Ceausescu, and Iliescu worked against the conspiratorial forces in the name of Romanian independence [Hall, 1997].)

However, much of the independent Romanian press asserted that the revolution was a spontaneous mutiny of the people, interrupted by a group of Soviets before it became too radical, and Iliescu slipped into power. Some independent publications cast doubt on the legitimacy of the rise to power of the new president, but in decrying the undemocratic formation of the new regime, all blame was aimed at Iliescu. Press coverage, even that of journalists critical of Ceausescu's reign of terror, glazed over the antagonistic role of the *Securitate* in the revolution, referring to unnamed "terrorists" instead. Hall attributed this phenomenon to fear – *Securitate* officers were still present in the new government (and others bitterly forced out of the government but still within the society) and neither the journalists nor the political leaders had forgotten their former power. As Hall (1997) stated,

Because of the state's complete control of political and civil society institutions under communist rule and the consensus on the need for such institutions to be independent in order for democracy to survive and thrive, most analysts have considered the question of ending the state's control over these spheres as paramount. Critical as this development is, it is not the same things as purging the media of the institutional legacy of the previous authoritarian regime. The "independent" Romanian press is a good example of this (p. 103).

This observation insinuates that true press independence can not develop until all tangible remnants of Ceausescu's regime are eliminated. While independent from the new regime, the press was still influenced by the *Securitate*.

### **Current Realities**

Romanian and Bulgarian print media have achieved formal independence from the control of the government. The editorial state of the press, however, is not necessarily free from distracting outside influence. As previously mentioned, the new idolization of and dependence on the free market has spurred an increase in tabloid journalism. The public disillusionment with the government and the perceived inadequacy of the press in spurring change also played a role in the popularity of gossip, scandal, and flippant news stories (Nikolchev, 1997). Publications did fill societal niches (e.g. community newspapers, ethnic minority press) and provided needed outlets for entertainment for the public, a diversity not existent under Communism (Gulyas, 2003, p. 91). But critics have noted that emergent journalistic aims of entertainment and profit have often come at the expense of professionalism and serious news reporting (McNair, 1994; Starck, 1998).

It should be mentioned, however, that some scholars claim the tabloid culture at least generates public interest in current affairs. A study surrounding the 1996 Bulgarian presidential election found that the tabloid press significantly *positively* impacted public political knowledge, evaluation of political parties, and support for democracy (Voltmer & Schmitt-Beck, 2006, p. 241). Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck posited that Bulgarian tabloids discuss politics with a sensational flair, making important information accessible to the community, as opposed to Western tabloids that focus on entertainment and gossip.

The post-communist press has faced allegations of corruption from critics, who point to copious examples of fact-altering or serving personal or political interests (Ognianova & Scott, 1997; Taylor & Napoli, 2003; Hall, 1997). The lack of defined codes of ethics as well as the Communist legacies of fear and deceit permeate the press; the first generation of journalists to never have experienced Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe is just beginning to enter the profession.

While much of the public remains skeptical of the present press role, the ideal of journalism as a path to salvation still resonates. A 1998 survey of professional journalists in Romania found that members of the field espouse a missionary ideal of the press (Coman, 2004). They professed to value “seeking information rapidly,” “analysis of social and political problems,” “debating major ideas,” and “educating the public,” among other functions, and placed “social scope, national interest [and] political importance” of a news story over its “sensational character and emotional power” (p. 50). Even if press realities differ from stated values, the idolized vision of journalist as a pivotal actor in a free society drives many young people to jobs in the press.

The “miracle” status of the journalist (constantly fed by the mythology sold to the public by the accomplished representatives of the profession) guarantees a steady flow of young people eager to become journalists (Coman, 2004, p.54).

But the influx of these inexperienced young people presents a critical problem to professional press development. Many new journalists lack training, and present Eastern European press systems often neither require nor provide formal instruction. Coman’s (2004) study reported that 13.5 percent of participating journalists in 1998 held university degrees in journalism, and many of these were probably trained at the former Academy of the Romanian Communist Party, still influenced by Communist era press-ideals (p. 49). About 64 percent of

respondents held university degrees in any field. The tradition of journalism guided by invention rather than principles and procedures has led to “an implicit *anti-professionalism*,” according to Coman (2004, p. 46).

The lack of academic training appears to be a worldwide phenomenon, however. In the West, newspaper editors tend to regard in-house, on-the-job training as immensely more valuable than theoretical university training. Notably, former socialist and communist regimes stress formal education (e.g. in East Germany, Romania, and Bulgaria), while many Western press systems regard such training as the ‘enemy’ (see Fröhlich & Holtz-Bacha, 2003; Gross & Heibert, 2003; Esser, 2003). Editors often prefer employees who can report and who understand the nuances of the press today, not academics who can write and discuss theoretical press ideals. In the U.S., journalists are not licensed and have no set of requirements to abide by (Weaver, 2003). Currently, there is a somewhat world-wide push to embrace formal journalism education – and to incorporate faculty with practical press industry experience – but the conversion is slow.

In evaluating the state of press freedom in Eastern Europe as of 2005, Peter Gross noted the persistent authoritarian tactics and lack of professionalism, by Western standards, in post-communist journalism. Societies lack legal protections for journalists, leaving them vulnerable to violence if they report objective facts. Defamation and insult of government officials is considered a criminal offense (Gross, 2005). Moreover, economic strains on the press have left newspapers susceptible to political influence; political parties, businesses with agendas, and the state offer subsidies in exchange for editorial bias.

Gross made the interesting observation that even nations perceived as more advanced than others suffer from corruption and irresponsibility.

Foreign media monitoring groups] judge the media to be “free” in the relatively more advanced Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovak Republic and Slovenia, and “partially free” in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia-Montenegro. The verisimilar distinctions between these two groups are actually few...In Hungary, one of the few Eastern European nations considered advanced in the democratization process, the State Secrets laws are used against journalists just as they are used in Romania, for example, where democratization has lagged (pp. 535-536).

Until the civil society gains stability and demands more responsibility from the press, change will come slowly.

### **Media Sustainability**

The international nonprofit organization IREX publishes a yearly media sustainability analysis of countries in Eastern Europe. The report is compiled with input from both a panel of media personnel specific to the country and impartial media professionals from IREX. For the 2006/2007 period, Romania received an overall media sustainability index (MSI) score of 2.78/4.00 – an improvement over prior years – placing it in the category of “near sustainability (IREX, 2007b). Among Romanian’s most pressing problems are the harassment of journalists and ensuing public apathy; the lack of enforced laws protecting free speech and media prerogatives; the absence of a defined code of professional ethics; and the concentration of media primarily among a handful of conglomerates.

While praising the expansion of niche markets, panelists criticized the overall lack of content diversity in the media. Entertainment reporting and political reporting tend to dominate the media. One panelist described the phenomenon of “herd journalism – when you find the same story everywhere, with exact[ly] the same approach.” Another said that “new technologies, the pharmaceutical industry, and other subjects that could affect business” are

generally ignored by journalists. Along the same vein, the panel also lamented the extreme financial, and thus political, influence that businesses and politicians still have on the media.

In its review of Bulgaria, IREX gave the nation an MSI score of 2.98/4.00, noting that improvement in the media is associated with Bulgaria's overall economic and social progress (IREX, 2007a). Bulgaria scored highest on its plurality of news sources that provide dependable and objective news. Panelists asserted that many state and independent news organizations are working for the public, not political, interest, and aspiring journalists enjoy free entry into the profession. Advertising has become a viable revenue source for the media, further empowering privately owned news outlets. The panelists note with satisfaction, "the free, apolitical, and market-determined access to sources of newsprint and printing facilities."

There are still transparency issues in the media, however. Concentrated ownership and monopolies are increasingly common, and journalists self-censor to protect economic interests. In the legal realm, the government has yet to implement a reliable system of licensing media outlets, and journalists have little effective recourse when threatened. The state continues to refuse to provide information that is not already public, though courts often side with journalists on this issue. With regards to journalism training, Bulgaria still generally lacks academic and practical training programs. Most experience is gained on-the-job.

Still, IREX is optimistic about the continued development of the Bulgarian media, "Bulgaria has achieved a level of unquestionable sustainability that cannot be challenged by economic and political upheaval" (IREX, 2007a).

## **Press Responsibility**

This begets the question, to whom is the press currently responsible? To whom *should* the press be responsible? Gross (2005) held that journalists presently serve the interests of press owners, editors, and directors – as well as their own financial and political interests. The press is replicating an authoritarian institution from the previous era. This analysis reinforces Coman's (2004) conclusion of an elite bourgeois class of journalists defining the rules of the newsroom that contribute to their financial and egoistic gain. The journalists who established the first independent press outlets after the fall of communism want to maintain control of the industry, and assert that any attempt to limit or redirect present reporting techniques are a threat to free media.

It is a valid concern, though, that external attempts to guide the press could quickly infringe on the rights of a self-sufficient press, leading scholars to debate who should set the standards (Ognianova & Scott, 1997). At this still-fragile period of political development in Eastern Europe, a government intervention could provoke a return to undemocratic policies, or at least some public anxiety. Researchers suggest that journalists themselves must soon set codes of professionalism and ethics (Starck, 1999; Ognianova & Scott, 1997).

Journalists, within the context of society, must also define the notion of 'free press.' It is important to note that 'free' is not synonymous with independent. Much of the Eastern European press is emancipated from formal government ties – thereby it is independent – but it is not necessarily free from political, authoritarian, or self-serving ideologies. Freedom demands responsibility and ethics (Starck, 1999; Gross, 2005).

Research suggests that the most important condition for analyzing press freedom is to judge media institutions within their societal circumstances. Starck (1999) declared that in the

case of Romania, specifically, the press within a transitioning society cannot be judged by the same standards as those in established Western nations.

The temptation is to compare developments in one press system with those of other press systems. This does not work very well, especially if the comparison is with press systems that operate in relatively stable political and economic environments. What this means is that we must avoid projecting or imposing our journalistic values on other press systems. Instead, we must try to understand press developments in their own social-political-economic contexts that, of course, is more difficult than looking for ourselves in somebody else's mirror (p. 39).

He maintained that perhaps some journalistic principles are universal, such as the pursuit of truth and the balance of responsibility with free expression, but that we cannot impose these standards on other societies – they must come about organically in their own time. McNair (1994) agreed that it is condescending for Western scholars to disparage a press system in a society not as politically or economically stable as their own.

The key to gauging current press freedom in Eastern Europe is to situate critiques within a transitioning society framework, and to primarily analyze relevant progress rather than making comparisons to an ideal system. As Gross (2005) writes, scholars should not be surprised by the lingering authoritarian mindsets or Communist legacies of fear and control, but should celebrate an emerging awareness of the *necessity* of working for true press freedom and responsibility (p. 537).

Post-communist press systems did not develop in a similar manner to United States or Western European press. A broken history of various political ruptures and hostile takeovers wiped away emergent values, and the contemporary press is forced to immediately establish itself without the convenience of time and gradual maturity (Coman, 2004). In fact, a transitional press is “functionally defined,” driven by pressing economic and societal needs

rather than philosophic ideals (Ramaprasad, 2005, p. 94). Advocates of emancipatory and developmental journalism state that objectivity and neutrality of the press are dwarfed by a need to speak on behalf of democracy, human rights, and personal freedoms (Carpentier, 2003). While research indicated that Eastern European press has tended more towards subjective entertainment stories than subjective informational stories, one needs to consider that press roles change as politics change.

The unique historic economic and political situations of the Romanian and Bulgarian media systems guided the remainder of this study. The following four research questions further interrogate a media system in transition:

**RQ1:** What ideological and cultural assumptions guide news reporting? Do the newspapers seem to serve the government, the public, or possibly both? How autonomous are these newspapers?

**RQ2:** What theory of media is reflected by the press? Should journalists write about topics the public wants to read, or should they write based on higher principles/notions of informing the public?

**RQ3:** How do media professionals in Romania and Bulgaria view the current state of press freedom? What criteria do they use to evaluate the press, and what aspects of journalism and professionalism do they believe are most critical to the field?

**RQ4:** What do they foresee in terms of press development in upcoming years? What progress/advancement would they like to see?

It is universally accepted that the press as a whole needs to establish its credibility within society. It needs to become a viable “Fourth Estate” force within its respective country. In order to attain this position, McNair suggests that four criteria must be met. Namely,

national economic stability must be established, a legal framework to deal with media issues must be formed and respected, the branches of government must have defined roles and relations with regard to each other, and “a new generation of media professionals must be reared and placed in positions of responsibility and authority” (1994, pp. 133-134). While his study speaks specifically of the Russian society, these ideas can be applied to any society in transition. As demonstrated throughout this review, politics, economics, and press performance are firmly related, and until any society is legally, economically, and politically sound the press may struggle to develop a respected and influential role.

## METHODOLOGY

Because research suggests that Bulgaria and Romania are still struggling with political transformations and press professionalism – in relation to the Western model of the press as a Fourth Estate – these two neighboring countries were chosen for analysis.

A critical point made by several scholars is the necessity to analyze a social institution from the point of view of the members of that society. It is futile, and somewhat patronizing, to judge an Eastern European nation by the standards or beliefs of a Western nation. Each society has a different history, traditions, and customs, and to understand the local press, a researcher must attempt to understand the surrounding political, economic, and social climate. Furthermore, the press should serve the role that its public needs and wants; therefore, it is imperative to evaluate its levels of freedom and professionalism mainly in terms of particular societal values.

Because scholars have established the need to localize journalism research, this study examined the opinions of Eastern European journalists on the state of their own press systems. Twelve journalists, media professionals, and university educators from Romania and Bulgaria responded to a set of eight interview questions via e-mail regarding the function of the press (See Appendix I). The contact information of journalists was found through online databases, international journalism societies, English newspapers in the two countries, and personal and academic contacts. If a journalist responded positively to the request for participation, he or she was then e-mailed the interview questions and a consent form, and asked to forward the questions to any interested colleagues. In this way, the study relied on both direct contact and snowball sampling to compile twelve interviews for analysis. Of those, three texts were from

Romanian respondents and nine were from Bulgarian respondents. (One of the Bulgarian respondents was an American now working in Bulgaria.) Four respondents were female and eight were male.

This study employed a long-interview methodology. This in-depth, qualitative approach allows respondents to culturally situate their beliefs and to freely write without strict space or topic constraints. The advantage is that “the method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). Thus it was ideal for an analysis relying on cultural contexts and implied meanings in the media professionals’ words. Responses were read through once, one directly after the other, to get a general idea of prevalent issues, points of contention, or comments from the respondents. Then, each response was coded with the research questions in mind; perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Bulgarian and Romanian press systems and other relevant comments were noted.

A major constraint was the language barrier between the researcher and the foreign journalists; only those who could communicate in written English could participate in the study. [Note: One participant did respond in Bulgarian and a student at Boston College in his third year of studying Bulgarian translated.] The option to write in Bulgarian or Romanian was not given to respondents, as nuances of the responses might be lost in translation. Asking participants to respond in a foreign language also posed a challenge to analysis of the texts, in which evaluating word choice and word usage is critical; a non-native speaker might not have a grasp on the full meaning of the words and expressions he or she is using. It should be noted that some grammar and spelling mistakes were corrected in the respondents’ quotes (included in the following sections) without altering the substance of the answers.

Further challenges included the fact that interviews were conducted through e-mail and not in person, and thus the researcher could not immediately clarify any questions or ask follow-up questions if responses were unclear. Also, the sample was chosen somewhat out of convenience, and therefore perhaps not representative of the populations; however, responses spanned a wide geographical area and communicated diverse opinions.

Another obstacle was the lack of response. Approximately 45 recruitment e-mails were sent (some to organizations that counted many journalists as members), along with 25 reminder e-mails, and only twelve media professionals responded (total includes journalists contacted as well as journalists referred by those contacts). It was assumed that journalists, who chose a writing-intensive profession that espouses spreading information and revealing the truth, would agree to answer the eight questions. But the contacted media professionals were less responsive than predicted; possibly they were busy, did not judge this study to be authentic, or were skeptical of responding to an unknown researcher's request. It was, however, stressed through the contact e-mails and consent form that participants could ask any questions of the researcher and that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, in an attempt to allay any apprehension (See Appendix II).

This study did not aim to test assumptions or to judge the Eastern European press through the stringent lens of an established theory. Instead, using a grounded theory approach, the responses guided the direction of the analysis and highlighted the key points that this study should focus on. The qualitative approach to the data focused the study on how individuals in Bulgaria and Romania make sense of their surroundings and their societal institutions (Berg, 1989).

The tenets of the social responsibility theory were considered while evaluating press freedom, mainly that the press must uphold its duty to serve the public – a duty of the press that is rather universally agreed upon (Siebert et al, 1956). However, this responsibility is largely defined by its particular public; the freedom and function of the press is identified by members of society. That said, the importance of fact-based reporting and truthful journalism was not discounted.

Therefore, this study is less of a complete determination of the current press freedom in Bulgaria in Romania and more of an exploration of the press strengths and weaknesses in those regions. Opinions on press accountability, journalist training, economic struggles, and the ideal role of the media all contributed to a meaningful discussion on the state of the Eastern European press.

## ROMANIAN AND BULGARIAN RESPONSES

The twelve participants brought a variety of media and training backgrounds to their responses. At one point (presently or in a prior professional capacity), four have been media trainers or professors, six have been reporters, five have been editors, one has been an author, and four have served as media experts for an NGO or a business, offering commentary or providing training to other journalists. Five participants received formal university training in journalism or a related media field, two specified learning the industry primarily on the job, and two had formal education exclusively in another field (such as history or philosophy). The remaining three either responded that they did not receive journalistic training or did not reply to that demographics question. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 63 years old.

### **What do you like most and least about your job?**

When recounting the positives and negatives of their current jobs, the participants addressed personal satisfactions and stresses as well as institutional strengths and weaknesses. The current university professors enjoy working with students and imparting their knowledge to others, while they don't appreciate the pressure of the position or the bureaucratic nature of the institution. Journalists also take pride in their ability to inform and influence the public. However, criteria for selecting news seemed to differ – H<sup>1</sup>, a 34-year-old journalist from Romania likes “that we are able to gather first-hand information and get to make it known to others, *as we consider relevant for their lives,*” while K, a 52-year-old journalist from Bulgaria, appreciates “the ability to inform the public about *things that concern them*”

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<sup>1</sup> All participants were randomly assigned initials to ensure confidentiality.

[emphasis added]. Besides informing the public, journalists also referred to a watchdog role in which they like being in a position “to criticize inadequate actions and decisions of the government.” Some also like the creativity and continuous change inherent in their press system.

Several journalists praised their personal freedom and independence in reporting. They qualified this freedom, however; “it is the sense to be free in expressing your thoughts, to say something other people would read,” said G, a 48 year old in Bulgaria. He noted that he enjoys this freedom as a news editorialist, but the situation may be different when reporting to a boss. A 58-year-old Romanian journalist, E, likes his opportunity “to be a real independent reporter,” but remarked that is challenging in Romania, where partisan political and economic groups influence the major newspapers. However, these same two journalists mentioned a lack of personal editorial freedom as a negative to their job; newspaper owners often have a strong hand in what news is printed. For example, G said:

What you consider important – according to your own judgment – differs (sometimes differs substantially) from the judgment of people with media power. In this sense, it boils down to limiting the freedom mentioned above. It is not censorship, but it is something close to it, since it involves a different perception on the [newspaper’s] agenda.

The most prevalent negative presented by the respondents was a lowering of professional standards and quality. This is seen as both an institution-driven change – “because of incompetent management in the years of transition it lost much of its prestige and is now attracting a decreasing number of bright people,” wrote 29-year-old M of Bulgaria – as well as a response to the mass audience’s preference for low-quality stories. Perhaps these

journalists are referring to sensationalized tabloid stories that attract readership (and thus, profit).

Other journalists listed particular personal grievances, such as dealing with long working hours or lazy colleagues.

### **What is the ideal role of the press in society?**

All the media professionals regard the press as a critical component of, and participant in, a democracy. The press should emphasize individual responsibility to society and galvanize societal development. J, 27-year-old Romanian journalist, commented that the role of the press should be “making democracy work [and] transforming people into participative citizens; otherwise, democracy and elections are simply an illusion.”

The press should serve as a watchdog over government and economic or non-government groups, such as corporations or criminal groups, that may abuse their power positions in society. According to participants, it has a responsibility to protect the public from economic or political hegemony and to empower the public by presenting relevant and complete facts. The opinion that the press needs to be fair, portraying society realistically and comprehensively, was prevalent among respondents; 44-year-old D of Bulgaria asserted that the press should be the “fourth branch [estate] based on its accuracy, unbiased covering, and profound, fair, honest research,” while 57-year-old B of Bulgaria said the press should “answer people’s need [of] a real picture of reality.”

The press should not only inform the public but should also assume an educational approach, helping readers to *understand* political, economic, and social decisions and processes, proclaimed E. The press should resist abuse of any of its various roles, e.g.

informational, educational, and entertaining, which includes sensationalism and low-quality, profit-driven content. G presented a philosophic approach to defining an ideal press role: “The ideal press of today is a press that is better than the press of yesterday – in every possible way.”

**What are some strengths of the current press system?**

The freedom of the press was again mentioned as a strength of the current press system by respondents. This freedom includes the ability to launch investigations, voice critical opinions, and freely express different points of view. Said H, “Press institutions are the only commercial enterprises protected under the constitution...There is no censorship from authorities, at least not explicit censorship.” He also noted the job opportunities available for good journalists. Other participants echoed the fluidity of staff and the constant flux of employees and ideas in the press in general that helps preclude monopolistic power and ensure a plurality of voices .

Reporters tend to be “more gutsy and willing to go for the story instead of only engaging in the ‘he said she said’ journalism that is often practiced in the US,” wrote C, a 45-year-old professor in Bulgaria, originally from the United States. Journalists in Bulgaria are more willing to confront political leaders of any party and to challenge lies and inconsistencies in the political realm, often because they believe their profession entails a certain degree of social responsibility. C also noted the plurality of press outlets that provide diverse angles on news reporting, and according to him, the Bulgarian public are “bigger newspaper readers” than are citizens of many Western societies.

Still, many respondents emphasized that press plurality and freedom can lead to ethical and professional breeches in the press. The fact that the “yellow press” style of sensationalized reporting is common in Romania and Bulgaria (according to participants) suggests that the balance between freedom and professional responsibility remains elusive. Some respondents explicitly commented on the increased openness of the press since Communist rule. D wrote that the influences on the press causing this sensationalism are no longer political, but rather are financial. Said E, “There is a strong tendency to transform the good and critical journals in[to] new tabloid formations, based on scandal...and ‘glamour,’ but less [on] deep investigation.” He also contends that the press cannot be considered free from state influence so long as the [Romanian] publicity and advertising tax is in effect. [Note: The tax rate, due each month advertising is in use, is locally set between 1% and 3%, applied on the value of the publicity and advertising services (Ernst & Young, 2007)]. He did conclude, however that “the press freedom is one of the most important realizations after the regime change in December, 1989.”

However, said several respondents, it is vital to identify nuances of the press when analyzing the state of the system. G noted that improvements in many areas of the press do not necessarily translate to a socially responsible free press. One must also be aware of the meaning behind certain terms:

The press is fairly independent (meaning not a subject of direct abuse, but of more refined manipulation), pluralistic (meaning there exists an alternative to a newspaper you don’t like or don’t trust), varied (meaning there exists press that targets local communities, press that resists the market’s pressure of the mainstream press). The press is self-aware also (meaning that it understands what kind of power it wields); it is a serious industry already (meaning demand and supply principle works)...The main problem here is that the above

described strengths do not necessarily mean higher quality, professionalism or a keener sense of responsibility (G).

This assessment is in line with that of Gross (2002), who noted that the lack of professionalism in the press is the most problematic issue in Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, asserted 63-year-old L of Bulgaria, it is important to recognize the press as a profoundly influential tool in forming society – perhaps implying its crucial position in shaping a democracy.

### **What are some obstacles to press freedom?**

When discussing obstacles to press freedom in their societies, the respondents were highly split on the degree to which external political and economic groups influenced news reporting. Exactly half of the respondents believe that the press is mainly free and autonomous, and the other half discussed the great extent to which money and politics manipulate the press.

Among the first group, respondents noted that there may exist occasional or isolated instances of political or economic pressures, but that the press is mostly uninhibited. “There are not any institutional obstacles to press freedom. It’s up to the personal morals of journalists,” said A, a 52-year-old professor in Bulgaria. One respondent explained that during Communist rule the government placed strong restrictions and pressures on the press, but that is no longer the case. Another referred to a Global Integrity report (2007), saying that she agrees with their assessment of Bulgaria’s media having strong integrity (a score of 87 out of 100). L wrote that there is definitely prejudice in publications, especially among the party

press, but that is normal and expected. Newspaper content is decided by subjective editors and journalists' opinion.

There is prejudice – especially in party publications, but that is normal. The publishing of a newspaper depends on all assignments, which are laid out by the chief editor [and] editorial [staff] (L).

Many of the remaining six respondents, however, wrote at length of economic, political, and criminal group obstacles to press autonomy. Some argued that the mainstream press easily accepts the agenda of political groups. Mostly, however, print media groups acquiesce to political influences out of economic concerns; in fact, economic influences appeared to be most problematic (based on the detailed descriptions of economic pressures in the responses). Financial pressure seems to manifest in two main ways: first, economically powerful organizations dictate, to an extent, the content of a newspaper; and second, the prevalent lack of funds among newspapers precludes large-scale investigations and internal developments (i.e. training programs, quality reporting).

While the press enjoys overt legal and political protection, journalists may self-censor to protect themselves or the financial interests of their papers. H found that:

In some cases media outlets are controlled by people who don't mind their newspapers, radio stations or television [stations] losing money as long as they can be used as a means of political and economic pressure. The current political system still favours this kind of mentality. This means journalists are often subjected to pressures, being asked to bend reality in a way that advantages the media owners or their friends. Censorship is often silent and it transforms into self-censorship.

G believes that even more problematic than businesses forcing agendas on newspapers is the fact that newspapers will often voluntarily refrain from risky investigations or controversial stories about a powerful group. He classified this sometimes mundane, superficial reporting as an aspect of yellow press – apparent in the press of any society, he said, but the norm in Bulgaria. “The danger to press freedom is related to the fact that such an environment sets false standards for journalism,” he stated.

J contended that another challenge is the lack of resources among many Eastern European newspapers. Journalists do not have the time or money to pursue large-scale investigations or follow-up stories on past news. The smaller publications are especially disadvantaged; those that do not bend to local business interests often can’t afford “the best journalist in town,” J wrote.

These opinions raise a question about who is the victim of economic pressures: Is it the newspapers as a whole, suffering from the agenda of media owners and external groups? Or is it the reporters, lacking professional resources and compelled to self-censor to satisfy their editors, perhaps along the lines of scholar Mihai Coman’s *Media bourgeoisie and media proletariat* argument?

### **To what groups is the press currently responsible?**

Many participants listed groups to which the media is legally and professionally responsible, such as the Journalist Professional Society [Union of Bulgarian Journalists] and Parliament-appointed Council of Media in Bulgaria. One commented that the council is not very responsive to journalists’ complaints, and one claimed that existing ethics codes have

done little to increase press responsibility. Two respondents addressed the fact that media are legally protected by press freedom laws and no group overtly controls what newspapers can publish. One noted that media offenses are now dealt with in civil, rather than criminal, court. G also insinuated that the lack of external press controls may be problematic, saying that the Bulgarian press is accountable to itself and therefore takes little measure to report responsibly:

The Bulgarian press is responsible mainly to itself (i.e. to media owners). The failure of implementing a press-council on self-regulation proves it. (The national press council – [instituted] to implement an ethics code – exists since 2004, but there is no visible change in press responsibility. As to minimizing harm, it is a known concept, but rare practice.)

Several respondents said the press is responsible to the public. Perhaps taking the question literally, one said that informational papers provide content for the widespread public, while niche publications have a more targeted domain. Another said that mainstream media are responsible to all groups (without giving examples), perhaps implying that media in the public eye will be affected by all public opinions and organizations. According to J, however, even if a newspaper purports to cater to audience needs, those needs are often assumptions on the part of journalists.

Media should answer primarily to its target audience (i.e. readers); however, this is mostly a ‘legend,’ since there are rarely any market studies to show who is the audience, what they think, etc. We [journalists] usually think, suppose, and take for granted that something is what the reader wants.

Economics again played a substantial role in this set of responses. M claimed that “newspapers are totally controlled by large economic groups and serve their interests unscrupulously. At present, the Bulgarian press is frankly manipulating, and what is more –

on a very elementary level.” Other respondents mentioned that economic groups, especially those with political connections, control the press to an extent. Publishers often control newspapers, and the publishers are often connected to big corporations. Media concentration under wealthy corporate owners is taking hold in at least Bulgaria. Even newspapers that finance exclusively through advertising sales – i.e. without corporate backing – will work to cut costs and maximize profit rather than placing emphasis on quality journalism, said two respondents.

Participants noted a handful of contemporary party publications under near-complete political influence. They also mentioned occasional criminal attacks on journalists who write controversial stories, insinuating that safety concerns might affect reporting.

#### **Are there economic struggles within the print media industry?**

The wording of this question invited varied responses. “Economic struggles” could, for example, refer to lack of funding and resources within publications, or it could signify pressure from external economic powerhouses. Each participant seemed to address a different interpretation of “economic struggles,” and as such their responses communicated meaningful, varied opinions.

Respondents were again split in their answers to this question. Four stated that economic struggles are not common, or that they had not personally witnessed an example of the press bowing to economic pressure. Occasionally advertising sponsors will influence the content of articles, stated some respondents. However, C noted that journalists are aware of corporate influence. Another respondent believes that due to increasing globalization,

economic problems will soon subside, and the real key to improving journalism will be focusing on professional training.

Other respondents, however, discussed substantial economic concerns within the current press system. One again mentioned the lack of financial resources among many publications leading to poor quality journalism. J discussed the tendency to view the press as a business rather than a public service, and to cut jobs and content when profit declines. He lamented “no longer having the resources necessary for old-fashioned good journalism, investigations and discovery of newsworthy information” – which leads one to wonder, is he referring to the accepted Western model of the Fourth Estate? Or to the pre-communist press in his country?

Three other respondents addressed the competition within the press, sometimes as a negative aspect of development. G wrote:

Paradoxically enough – for competition invites innovations – competition led not to diversification, but to unification, or rather uniformity. Let us take the so-called mainstream press. It targets the so-called general audience. Competition in the field, i.e. targeting one and the same audience, led to the attempt to do what other newspapers do – instead of looking for something new. This is related not so much to the content, but rather to the way of coverage.

G explicitly stated, however, that he did not wish to condemn or condone this method, but wanted to mention that it exists. Other participants wrote that competition to attract an audience spurred sensationalist tactics.

C thinks that economic influence “affects the selection of stories to cover. I don’t think that we have reached the more sophisticated, subtle point of altering the nature of coverage, at least in many instances.”

E wrote that economics and politics are tightly linked, with each economic power using his press outlets to support a political group. Especially in 2008, which is an election year in Romania, the press can be used to privilege one candidate over others. He gave an example of a major media mogul who is very strong in the conservative party and also a member of the former communist *Securitate* police force to illustrate the relationship between politics and economics (and perhaps also the communist legacy in the region):

Each main economical group is supporting political groups through his own press companies. Example: One of the biggest media leaders [name omitted] is the strongest authority in the Conservative Party, but at the same time, he has three TV channels and strong printed media trusts. Also, he was a main member of the former ‘*Securitate*’ secret police in the communist period. Now, 2008 is an election year, so such strong press concentrations become more and more important.

### **Are new journalists adequately trained for their positions?**

A majority of respondents believe that current journalists are not sufficiently trained for their roles within the press, or within any aspect of the media industry. Some answers were short; “No, unfortunately” or “In most cases, no.” Others were lengthier, and more reproachful of the influx of untrained journalists. M portrayed poor training as a side-effect of, in her opinion, the declining quality of the overall profession.

Because the profession as a whole is losing prestige, new journalists are usually ill trained or not trained at all...The owners and managers of large newspapers have lowered their quality criteria significantly.

J wrote about a shortage of journalists in certain areas of Romania and having to recruit journalism students from nearby universities. According to him, the journalism faculty and instruction are inadequate, headed by a grammar professor, and students graduate “unable to write a short piece of news by themselves and without the most basic knowledge of public institutions and what these do.” His response raises the issue of differences between theoretical or language-based education and practical, reporting-based training.

Another respondent agreed that university education is too theoretical to prepare students for reporting jobs, and added that training on-the-job is often rushed and inconsistent. Students are trained in the art of sensationalism and arrogance, not in knowledge or journalistic skills (F). Several seemed to believe that “training” connotes formal, university education, noting that journalists are not trained, and often have to learn from senior colleagues.

G highlighted the tendency of editors to tell new journalists to “forget what they studied” once they reach the newsroom, but that it is decreasing – perhaps because the skills of journalists graduating from universities are increasing, he conjectured. This response seems to reinforce the aforementioned scholarly observations that editors value on-the-job training over formal schooling. Perhaps the shift is also due to a growing respect for university education.

Two participants wrote that journalists are adequately trained. In Bulgaria, said A, competition to study journalism is formidable, therefore only the most qualified students enter the program:

In universities in Bulgaria, competition for studying journalism, together with law, medicine, economics and psychology had always been very strong. So, students in journalism are one of the best.

E wrote that the majority of Romanian journalists have university schooling and some have master's degrees. However, he also noted a discrepancy between succeeding a university and thriving as a journalist, insinuating that the press does not implement the ideals studied in school.

Two other respondents cautioned that one cannot generalize when talking about the characteristics and training of journalists. Some are well trained, some are not, some go to school and some are trained on the job, they said.

### **Additional thoughts on the press**

The last section of the interview asked participants to discuss any aspect of the press in their countries that they found significant. Five did not add further comments; the remaining seven chose to address the market's effect on the press and sensationalism, the decline of the print industry and the rise of online media, the fact that the press has made great progress since the 1990s, and the persistent lack of professional standards, among other topics.

One participant noted the sheer number of current publications, too many for citizens to read, even – but this attests to the freedom of speech in Bulgaria. Another wrote that while most Romania media outlets don't yet have effective training strategy, company style guides,

or codes of ethics, much has improved since the early 1990s – and the press continues to improve.

Other respondents addressed the market as the controlling agent of the press; tabloids and sensationalism often prevail and warp the expectations of the audience. A referenced the “shadow economy” subsidizing some newspapers that would not survive in the current market system, thereby explaining why so many publications continue to print:

In market economy, market is the top regulative mechanism for all kind of production, including newspapers. In Bulgaria, still there are newspapers which are published regularly though obviously they could not survive in this kind of economy. That means they are subsidized by the so-called “economy in shadow” (i.e. by unaccounted funds).

Readership of print newspapers is declining, as is the industry overall, said participants. One said this was due to competition among papers as well as low professional standards (that perhaps discourage readers). J noted, however, that media outlets practicing ‘good’ journalism will continue to attract an audience and find opportunities to grow. He also stated that online media will play an increasingly larger role in the news industry; those publications which embrace to this change will flourish.

Online media expands rapidly and those who do not turn their online presence into more than a copy of the printed editions will no longer matter. I think online ads will account for a significant portion of the media’s earning [by] 2009, three years earlier than most official estimates. Newspapers who already have a good presence [online] and have built a community will succeed and take in the lion’s share of ads (J).

The sample size of this study was too small and disproportionately split between Bulgarian and Romanian participants to analyze responses by country. Although opinions of these Eastern European journalists about two different press systems were addressed as one cohesive sample, nuances of each individual answer were acknowledged. This study is not representative of the opinions of every journalist in Romania and Bulgaria, and the following analysis of the responses is not intended to be generalized to the societies at large. The findings are the thoughts and concerns of this group of twelve respondents, meant to illuminate and contribute to the discussion of Eastern Europe press freedom rather than to define it.

## ANALYSIS

### **Impartiality and Subjectivity**

The twelve media professionals qualified their press systems in terms of ideals and goals, of shortcomings and failures, of necessary change and infuriating stagnation. They spoke from the perspective of individuals involved in the development of the press but also as citizens affected by, and dependent on, the current press systems in Bulgaria and Romania. Overall, they seemed somewhat frustrated with the slow speed of progress – progress being defined by many as increasing press independence, professionalism, and quality of news content.

It must be remembered, however, that the majority of participants referenced the freedom and plurality of the press, and the advances that have been made since the 1989 revolutions. “Unlike in the previous period, the press in Bulgaria is now a very open system in terms of staff movement and recruitment,” said M. It appears that, twenty years after the violent fall of Communism, these media professionals acknowledge the development from the Communist press, but feel that their “ideal” press has yet to materialize.

Participants seemed to believe in the value of a fair, balanced, accurate press. They expect the press to serve citizens by opposing government corruption and fighting for community development and rights. The job of the press should be “to inform, to criticize and to fight for freedom of speech, to investigate the mischief of government,” commented K. They expect the ideal press to be free from political and economic binds, both official and informal. Notably, no one used the word “objective” to describe an ideal press; while this may be an issue of vocabulary for those responding in a foreign language, it also may be an

interesting insight into preferred press function. In fact, based on the calls for the press to “discuss the *most important* problems in a society” (A) and “to empower citizens by giving them *relevant, interesting* and *useful* information” (H) [emphasis added], it appears that these participants recognize that a degree of subjectivity is inherent – and crucial to – the press system. Journalists, editors, and media owners all make decisions on what gets published, and the participants call for responsibility in making these decisions, not necessarily objectivity. This society-sensitive subjectivity also characterizes Western press systems, as scholar Herbert Passin argued as early 1963, and necessarily arises out of personal histories and community concerns.

Except in the authoritarian states lip service is usually paid to the ideal of the neutral reporter standing outside and above politics. But in reality most serious journalists are deeply *engagé*. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these attitudes are an automatic imitation of Western attitudes. Journalists in transitional societies are equally familiar with the Western models of the non-partisan, objective reporter and of the passionately committed intellectual; their preference for commitment is not an accidental choice among equally available merchandise but the result of particular internal developments that lend them to a similar conclusion (p. 123).

Still, that is not to assert that the participants don't value independence or conscious rejection of bias. Many stated that the press should present reality as accurately as possible, or to give coverage to multiple sides of an issue. According to M:

The role of the press is to protect the society from being misinformed and inculcated [with] certain opinions. The press should not indoctrinate opinions but present all facts and their interdependence so that a reader can create an opinion of his own.

The first part of her statement suggests that to *protect* society, journalists must make judgments about potential threats to society, and refute institutional statements and coercions that journalists deem to be harmful or false. The second, however, connotes that her ideal press would strive to be impartial and detached in presenting facts to the public. These views appear to be at odds; as Gross (2002) stated, the Eastern European press has (as of 2002) yet to fully conceptualize its proper role.

This discussion also recalls Waisbord's (2003) contention that 'trust' is won not by journalists who abide by an objective, aloof journalism of information, but rather by those who practice a journalism of opinion and whose views resonate with readers. This problematic juxtaposition of press neutrality and responsible subjectivity was apparent in the varying natures of participants' responses.

### **Freedom and Economics**

The attempt to classify an ideal press involves a host of loaded terminology. When participants call for freedom, or state that it already exists, how do they qualify 'freedom'? When they demand responsibility from their journalists, what does 'responsibility' entail? When J states that the role of press is "transforming people into participative citizens; otherwise, democracy and elections are simply an illusion," what is he implying about the relationship between press and society at large, and what is his definition of a working democracy?

Respondents generally believe that media are free, using the words "freedom" or "free" in their interviews as strengths of the press or reasons they like their job. Based on their answers, "freedom" seems to imply the lack of formal institutional control or legal

jurisdiction over newspaper content. M wrote, “Legally, media are pretty free; there isn’t much control over what one can publish.” According to K, “The press has the freedom to express different opinions,” and G agreed that there is freedom in expressing thoughts.

But participants also communicated the fact that individual journalists are often not free to cover stories as they wish, instead responsible to editors, media owners, and economic interests. Stephen Reese (2001) discussed the freedom ideal within the context of professionalism. He echoes the respondents’ opinion that legal freedom does not necessarily translate to complete professional freedom.

Freedom is perhaps the most vigorously articulated international professional value. The [1994] Declaration [of Chapultepec] is based on the idea that a free press is necessary to enable societies to function as effective democracies.<sup>2</sup> Often this emphasis on official restraint may simply translate as the ability for the news organization and its employees to go where they want and transmit information across national boundaries. Less often emphasized is the freedom of journalists to follow their own professional dictates against organizational pressure (p. 176).

Participants referenced limits set by editors. G wrote that he appreciates freedom of expression in his capacity as an editorialist: “Probably this was the reason why I was not fascinated by reporting, but rather by commenting [editorial writing]. Also, this was probably the reason why I was never fascinated by a full-time journalism job, with a boss to give you orders.” He insinuated that while he is free to address any topic or opinion in his job, that might not be the case for journalists in a hierarchical organization. Several respondents also addressed the self-censorship prevalent among Romanian and Bulgarian journalists.

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<sup>2</sup> The 1994 Declaration of Chapultepec was issued by the Interamerican Press Association, stating that “no law or act of government may limit freedom of expression or of the press whatever the medium.”

According to H, “There is not censorship from authorities, *at least not explicit censorship*...Censorship is often silent and it transforms into self-censorship” [emphasis added].

Reese’s research (2001) again supports these observations. He addresses that fact that control may not be directly exercised by economic or political institutions, but that journalists still work within the confines of a power structure.

We [researchers] are concerned with power that is exercised periodically, implicitly, and not overtly, and as a result, is not so readily available to direct observation. Indeed, a journalist anticipates organizational boundaries and the power of which is manifested in self-censorship by its members. This self-policing is more effective than direct censorship, however, because outsiders are often not even aware that anything has taken place (p. 182).

The value of interviewing current media professionals is that they could expose press practices – self-censorship or reporting procedures – which citizens in the community might not perceive. In most companies, employees must follow the guidelines of the boss, but this situation raises questions of autonomy and social responsibility when applied to the press – do the respondents consider press to be a business or a public service? Should journalists be responsible to their editors and bosses, or to the public?

Many participants expressed explicitly that the press should serve the public, or the interests of the democracy. As such, one can infer that they intend the press to be a unique organization, one that exists not for profit or professional gain, but rather one upholds public service ideals, even at personal cost. The press should focus on “mobilizing the society’s

resources for improvement and development,” commented F, a 52-year-old Bulgarian media expert.

The press is a business, however. Participants alluded to this fact by stating that many newspapers face funding shortages and therefore sacrifice quality journalism in an attempt to raise profits. As with any business, or entity vying to survive in society, the press is susceptible to financial pressure. When discussing economic ties and influences, the majority of responses condemned the actions of the press. Eleven mentioned the concerns in at least one of the responses; six did so when discussing obstacles to press freedom. Also, when asked whether there are any economic struggles within the print media industry, the eight who responded affirmatively generally wrote several sentences to a couple paragraphs; the ones who believed there aren't struggles or only occasional struggles wrote at most one sentence. Perhaps those who have witnessed economic control feel very passionately that it affects their work. Most respondents felt that newspapers were placing economic gain over public service, and that media owners were not concerned with socially responsible ideals.

“A huge part of the media group owners are bound by economic and political interests which they impose in their publications,” wrote M. While he mentioned both political and economic influences, outrage over the economic generally took precedence over the political among the respondents. As participants described, economic pressures manifest in many ways. Least apparent is the overt control over content or the restrictions imposed on newspapers by powerful financial backers. More common, according to participants, is the subtle manipulation of and by journalists regarding the news they cover and investigations they launch. As mentioned above, journalists – knowingly or not – self-censor to avoid offending advertisers, or editors ask for certain facts to be emphasized or omitted. Said H:

“Journalists are often subjected to pressures, being asked to bend reality in a way that advantages the media owner or their friends.” Many participants referenced the rarity of serious investigations in the current press, attributing this to the need to ignore any corruption of financial sponsors. G stated that not only do instances of economic pandering hurt specific newspapers now, but that “such an environment sets false standards for journalism.” Beyond instances of institutional control, lack of funds also threatens the viability of autonomous press; limited money affects the number of journalists at the paper, which affects the amount of time and effort there is to write quality stories or launch long investigations. Funds impact the training programs newspapers can offer and the quality of equipment journalists have to work with.

While participants generally agreed that the press is legally “free,” they detailed such economic influences as obstacles to press freedom. The use of the terms “elite,” “boss,” and “media owners,” among others, within their discussions of economic and other obstacles to freedom implies that they feel the newsroom hierarchy to be stifling. Perhaps they view the top members of newspapers as subscribing to a business-model of their organizations, while journalists should report news that benefits the public, not the company owners. According to Gross (2002), “journalists are beholden to owners, publishers, news directors, and editors, or to their own personal interests” (p. 163). Again, this perception is in line with Coman’s argument that the entrenched members of the press view it as their creation to control.

Not all participants condemned press dependence on economic groups so strongly. According to C, economic struggles are not particular to Eastern European press systems; “As in all media systems; time and energy constraints affect reporters’ abilities to do their jobs.” He acknowledged that corruption can result from corporate influence in the press, but that

such interference is not a daily occurrence. He himself has not witnessed an instance of newspapers dropping stories to assuage advertisers – perhaps because he works as a university professor, rather than within the newsroom – though he has heard such stories from media professionals outside the press. Finally, wrote C, “Journalists are aware of influence in reporting,” perhaps implying that they are complicit in a market-based style of journalism, rather than being deceived by owners. Still, none of the respondents explicitly accepted the newspaper-as-business role, or stated that earning profits was a valid concern for press companies.

One of the biggest complaints was the tabloidization and sensationalism of news. This is due to lack of training (and therefore motivation or skills) of journalists, but mainly due to the company drive to earn profit. Respondents said that newspapers will imitate each other’s method of shallow reporting, aiming to be the quickest and most entertaining in telling the story, regardless of the quality of reporting or writing. They view sensationalized stories as an indicator of dishonorable journalism, as well as a result of profit-oriented newspapers. Gross (2003) warned that this sensationalism, along with politically biased reporting, can offend audiences; “The media’s penchant for ‘reporting’ through the political lenses of owner, subsidizers, editors, director and journalists, not to mention their inclination for sensationalizing, often also for political reasons, is likely to create an anti-political climate” (p. 86).

According to Voltmer & Schmitt-Beck’s study (2006), however, the tabloid press actually increased the Bulgarian public’s knowledge of politics and support for democracy. Although often devoid of profound reporting, tabloid stories provide the public with important information in an intelligible and fast-paced format. Many respondents denied any benefit of

sensationalism in quality journalism, but perhaps the fact that – according to C – the average Bulgarian citizen is an avid newspaper reader can in part be attributed to the fact that the news is accessible to all. Even if the reporting is (quite) imperfect, the plurality of voices and publications is symbolic of the change that has taken place in society and reassures the public of that fact (Gross, 2003; Splichal, 1992).

### **Responsibility and Professionalism**

The discussion of economic authority in newspapers helps elucidate the notion of ‘responsibility’ in the press. As already addressed, the opinion that newspapers should serve exclusively the public was prevalent in the interviews. Participants qualified a responsible press as one that:

- informs and educates the public
- reports all facts and sides of a situation
- represents reality fairly and accurately
- watches over actions of powerful groups and institutions, such as government
- resists outside influence or abuse of its own power in society
- fights for social rights and development
- transforms people into active citizens in their society and government
- abides by tenets of honesty and thorough research
- actively rejects bias

Essentially, a fully responsible press is an ideal press, one immune from outside economic, political, or criminal influence and one with the public interest always at the forefront. According to A, the press has not yet reached a satisfactory level of responsibility;

“Press should be more responsible, satisfying first of all the needs of society, not of journalists engaged in press.” But all the above traits of what Passin (1963) would call an ‘objective and detached’ reporter are ideals not attainable in real-life social and political contexts.

As previously discussed, though, the participants’ descriptions of these values suggest that an objective reporter is not what is needed. Rather, participants are calling for a conscientious reporter who uses his professional judgment to *determine* what is informative, enlightening, fair, accurate, unbiased, etc. According to the responses, a responsible press also “makes democracy work” and “raises the society and every individual member’s responsibility” – both of which involve subjectivity to interpret and carry out.

Responsibility is closely linked to professionalism. Participants also stated that current levels of press professionalism are insufficient for their emerging democracies. After listing the achievements of independence, plurality, and variety, G wrote, “The main problem here is that the above described strengths do not necessarily mean higher quality, professionalism or [a] keener sense of responsibility.”

Gross (2002) stated that the Eastern European media are democratized – that is, they are legally free and embody a plurality of opinions – but they are not professionalized, and that is the largest obstacle to press evolution.

They need universally agreed upon standards and some combination of review boards, ombudsmen, media critics, and professional journalistic associations, as well as publications to publicly assess their work. They need to become morally and professionally accountable to their audiences. They need to supply accurate, balanced, complete, and verifiable information (p. 174).

In this conclusion to his book on the evolution of Eastern European media, Gross presented the ideals also communicated by the participants of this study. By enumerating the levels of professionalism that the press needs to attain, he is asserting that they are not there. The respondents seem to relate the lack of professionalism to the deluge of press economic commitments – just A noted that “there are not any institutional obstacles to press freedom. It’s up to the personal moral of journalists.” According to Reese (2001), however, there is a combination of institutional and personal pressures that influence a journalist’s level of professionalism.

Reese developed a hierarchy-of-influences model, stating that ‘professionalism’ must be understood both in relation to a specific society and to a global perspective of how a professional journalist should behave. First is the *individual level*, at which a journalist’s personal training, opinions, and background affect his behavior. Next is the *routines level*, which involve rules, norms, and procedures practiced within the journalist’s work environment that contribute to his attitudes. Third is the *organizational level*, which takes into account the goals and policies of societal organizations, which at this level of the hierarchy often have ways to enforce their goals – economic in the case of journalism, he notes. At this stage, Reese pointed out that “news is an organizational product, produced by increasingly complex economic entities which seek ever more far-reaching relationships in their ownership patterns and connections to non-media industries” (p. 181).

Next is the *extra-media level*, involving influences from outside the journalist’s media organization. These include the government, advertisers, interest groups, and other media organizations. (Perhaps it is this level that accounts for the phenomenon of many press outlets reporting the same story in the same sensationalized manner, as noted by the study

participants.) Reese also referred to the power of the elites at this level, and asserted that individual journalist ethics may be negated by the decisions of media leaders. Last is the *ideological level*, which represents assumptions of power, and how it is maintained and exploited within society.

Reese's discussion of increasingly broad influences is intended to emphasize that 'professionalism' can be defined at any level, and is in fact an amalgamation of multiple experiences. Respondents reflected many of these levels in their responses: A mentioned individual morals; several respondents addressed self-censorship at work or the system of receiving assignments from editors, indicating personal work routines; J wrote that "big newspapers barely cling on to a profit margin" and abide by a " 'sell, sell, sell' business model", illustrating an organizational constraint; and many participants addressed the external economic and political pressures at the extra-media level. In discussing the current situation of press professionalism – and opining what it should strive for – the respondents are actually calling for a transformation of several processes and systems in their societies, especially at the extra-media and ideological levels. In order for the press to transform, all social institutions must reform along with it.

### **Training**

A major process that needs improvement is the area of journalist training, said the participants. There was a discrepancy in the responses as to what training entailed – formal journalism studies at a university or on-the-job learning in the newsroom. The majority seemed to state or imply that 'training' is associated with formal education, before a journalist begins his job. This is in line with the world-wide push for more university training of

journalists, and with G's statement of fewer editors telling journalists to "forget what you have studied." Several respondents believe that the competitive journalism programs in universities produce qualified journalists; others say that training can only be judged on an individual basis.

However, certain participants stated that current university education is not sufficient training. J said that the faculty does not have any journalism experience nor adequate knowledge of the current political or media landscapes. F believes that "university education is mainly theoretical; [journalists] are trained after joining a medium but not consistently and not to high standards."

In their concern for training, these responses are not unique to Romania and Bulgaria. Johanna Cleary (2003) discussed the problem of developing acceptable training programs in the context of a transitioning Mexican society.

One often cited criticism of journalism training in Mexico is that many reporters and editors do not have university degrees and are performing highly demanding jobs with only a high school education. For those who do have advanced academic training, university journalism programs in Mexico have been criticized for being out of touch with what employers want and need from young reporters (p. 167).

She also noted that studies of training in the U.S. found that newsroom training is inconsistent and inadequate, but that editors in Latin America were more likely to acknowledge the need for improved training than the offending editors in the U.S (as of 1989). Cleary concluded that, in order for journalism education to fulfill its intended role, practical training needs to be incorporated into the theoretical programs.

Respondents echoed that call, and overwhelmingly conveyed the sentiment that quality of journalism will not improve until the quality of journalist does.

### **The Pioneer Role and Idealism**

Through their definition of press responsibility and professionalism, the participants implied a sense of what their roles, as journalists and media professionals, should entail. Interestingly, many stated that they personally were already fulfilling these roles; while the press at large is a bastion of sensationalism and corruption, they believe that they are part of the minority striving for improvement. E wrote that he likes “being a real independent reporter [though] this is difficult here,” and J mentioned that he works for what he considers a “quality” newspaper that has had six consecutive years of circulation increases. The fact that this study asked for value judgments may account for these opinions (i.e. that the participants are among the few journalists working for ideals); those with strong ethical and professional convictions decided to speak out.

In their 1991 book *The American Journalist*, David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit presented three possible roles for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century journalist: adversarial, interpretive, and disseminator (p. 115). The interpretive role is the most subscribed to; also referred to as the participant role, journalists in this capacity are actors in distributing news rather than just messengers. Journalists have the ability to interpret newsworthiness and to judge the potential value of investigations and other public concerns.

Next is the information dissemination role; according to Weaver & Wilhoit, “entertaining and providing quick information are considered important by more journalists than in the earlier years” (p. 114). This finding is in contrast to the opinions of the

participants, who generally criticized the tendency of the press to favor entertainment over complete information.

Least of all, journalists advocate the adversarial role, involving skepticism and criticism of government actions; a ‘watchdog’ function. This, however, is a role very much endorsed by respondents to this study. It is important to note that the journalists in Weaver & Wilhoit’s study were American, based in a country with a generally stable democracy and economy. In Romania and Bulgaria the society is still very much in a state of flux, perhaps necessitating a greater accountability from the government as it establishes a secure democracy.

The participants, however, espoused an additional – if not primary – role: a pioneer role. In their responses they were critical of the current press while advocating ideals of social responsibility and ethical journalism. They portrayed their press as being at a crossroads, finally free from overt political control and forging a new standard of journalism. At this moment, when economic pressures are high but the ideals of journalism not yet forgotten, the press needs to choose its direction – catering to profit or working for principles. The media professionals in this study seem to classify their role as rather revolutionary, as one of helping to illuminate essential values within their professions and pushing for professional changes within their organizations. Journalists as a whole in Romania and Bulgaria have this responsibility, they implied; the press must strive to redefine – and adhere to – its values, present itself as socially conscientious and trustworthy, and establish universal commitment to quality. Journalists must be pioneers in this era of press freedom.

The participants were idealist in their responses, demanding their press be accountable to the public and to inherent codes of professional ethics. According to many, profit is not a

valid motive for editorial decisions, and a truly mature press (not *free* press, as its freedom has already been established) makes decisions without external influence. While commendable, several seem to be striving for an ideal notion of press, unaffected by other societal institutions, ambivalent to market pressures. With complete professionalism as their benchmark, journalists may easily be disillusioned. Said G, “any ‘ideal’ role is pure utopia.” It is interesting to note that, taking into account the entire interview, the participant with an American background tended to be less critical of the Bulgarian press than did the Bulgarian participants. This is perhaps because they were comparing their current press system to an ideal, while the one respondent with an American background analyzed it in relation to the imperfect contemporary United States media.

Reese (2001) also denies the practicality of such absolute professionalism, a notion that, he says, prejudices citizens against a media that is not ideal.

We evaluate media performance against the major social values of freedom, equality, and order. We assume that journalists must have a high degree of professional freedom and autonomy to carry out their function, and we gauge their work against some standard of fairness, or equal representation of relevant social features. Ethically, we trust that journalists will observe standards that do not violate expectations of social order. We wish that journalists would adhere to certain roles and ethical conduct because we think that doing so benefits the larger society (p. 175).

The propensity to judge the press based on an ideal of a discrete Fourth Estate, while helpful in clarifying areas to improve, can hinder the organization of a credible media system and the everyday journalistic work in transitional societies. Nowhere in the world, not even in stable societies, is the press free from economic, political, and personal bias. As mentioned in

the literature review, much of the Western European and American press garner low levels of public trust. Gross (2002) drew many comparisons between the American and the Eastern European press; both sensationalize, trivialize public affairs, and occasionally engage in sloppy reporting. Both sets of journalists are viewed as too opinionated, biased, and arrogant by the public, and self-present as experts when they may not completely understand a situation (p. 173).

Differences in world perspectives of these two systems, however, may be due to the fact that the United States enjoys a long history of press freedom and has adopted formal codes of professionalism, while Bulgaria and Romania have experienced political press freedom for a decade – and are still determining what that freedom requires and permits. America’s government is an established democracy, its press developed alongside its economic market, and its public is familiar with the guarantees of freedom of speech. In Eastern Europe, however, the democracies are still stabilizing, the press is struggling to develop in the context of an existing world market, and the public is still determining how to interact with societal institutions.

The journalists in the study are striving for lofty goals that stimulate their work. However, they must be careful to reconcile those goals with the realities of their press systems. “The media should reflect and serve their ‘unperfect’ democracies, animated by idealism but without illusions, prizing individual and societal freedom above all else” (Gross, 2002, p. 174).

### **Standards for the Press: Cultural or Universal?**

In its attempt to analyze the current state of the press in Romania and Bulgaria, this study relied on the opinions of media professionals from these societies. As Stark (1999) stated, it is unproductive to judge a media system based on external standards; each society has its own needs and expectations. However, the participants seem to refer to a universal ideal of a responsible press. D discussed the need for the press to assume a Fourth Estate role – a global prototype of impartial journalism – and C made several comparisons to the United States – i.e. the Bulgarians read more newspapers than the average U.S. reader, and journalists engage in more gutsy journalism than just the “he said/she said” reporting of the U.S. Granted, this may simply be a comparison to situate the Bulgarian media in a context familiar to the researcher, but it also illustrates the tendency to evaluate Eastern Europe in terms of comparisons, rather than on its own situation.

Reese also wrestled with the global approach to journalism. While he noted that professionalism is often nationally defined according to the different tensions of different societies, currently there is a push for a world-wide characterization of ‘professionalism’ that is still being fleshed out.

In recent years more attention has been devoted to universal principles of human rights. Is it similarly possible to establish principles of journalistic practice acceptable to the diverse world nations? US government and media initiatives have worked to encourage the adoption of the ‘objective’ press model in the emerging democracies of South American and Eastern Europe. They implicitly assume that US-style journalism is a natural and inevitable world mode... The post-Cold-War environment has brought a more receptive climate for internationalizing the concept of press professionalism (176).

The participants generally seem to believe it is possible to establish a universal definition of professionalism, based on the ideals of a public-serving, inherently ethical press. Without interviewing journalists in the countries of study, however, this conclusion could not be drawn. When participants make the case for local press improvement and impartial journalism, it is enlightening. When Western researchers impose that position upon Eastern Europe, it can be condescending.

Passin (1963) stated more than 45 years ago that despite the Western models and comparisons, developing media will progress according to their own societal situation and beliefs, not because of external standards imposed upon them.

Western ideas may be quoted to lend authority or justification, but the specific form of the issue of detachment versus commitment is an indigenous response to the course of political development in transitional societies (p. 123).

### **Research Questions Revisited**

Participants addressed all the research questions that guided this study.

**RQ1:** *What ideological and cultural assumptions guide news reporting? Do the newspaper seem to serve the government, the public, or possible both? How autonomous are these?*

According to the majority of respondents, the current press is guided primarily by profit and economic interests. The responses also indicated, however, that the reporting is driven by a pursuit of freedom, political accountability for government officials, and a desire to inform the public. All journalists in the study wrote that their personal reporting is

motivated by the desire to provide quality, unbiased, accurate, and socially important news to the public.

Culturally, though, the nation is still dealing with the communist legacy of a propaganda press, which has led the print industry to consciously separate from governmental political control. An assumption in news reporting seems to be that political figures, and powerful economic figures, are not to be trusted, and the journalists must bring corruption to light. While reporters often consider the wishes of economic supporters when investigating stories, several respondents and scholars agree that the Eastern European press is very vocal in faulting political authority. As such, the press seems to serve the public's interests and its own interests quite a bit more than it serves the 'government.' The memory of the communist puppet-press has compelled current journalists to make manifest a definite break with political officials.

**RQ2:** *What theory of media is reflected by the press? Should journalists write about topics the public wants to read, or should they write based on higher principles of informing the public?*

Participants espoused the social responsibility media theory, insisting the media are in a position of influence in society and must be conscientious of the effects of their work. They believe that the press should abide by professional tenets in reporting and publish critical pieces that inform and educate, rather than merely entertain, the public. They seem to think that the print media in their current state do not practice social responsibility, instead competing with each other to publish sensationalized, shallow stories. The public, they wrote, seems to like to read tabloid journalism – why would newspapers continue to practice it if

they weren't drawing a profit? – but journalists should take it upon themselves to raise the standards, and thus the public's expectations.

**RQ3:** *How do media professionals in Romania and Bulgaria view the current state of press freedom? What criteria do they use to evaluate the press, and what aspects of journalism and professionalism do they believe are most critical to the field?*

As addressed at the beginning of this section, the respondents view the press to be free, if freedom is to be interpreted as without formal legal or political constraints. The press is democratized, pluralized, and media owners and editors are allowed full control of their media content. Some people may disagree with how they exercise their decision-making power, but those involved with the publication have full jurisdiction over its substance.

The participants interpret freedom as the absence of direct governmental control, perhaps because the press was synonymous with regime opinion for so long. They do not assert, however, that the press is free from economic influences or from internal power struggles. The majority view the contemporary press to be very much in the clutches of economic supporters, and very much removed from notions of professionalism. Most scrutinize the press in terms of its lack of quality investigations, its apparent bias in 'news' reporting, and its attempts to sensationalize news when presenting it to the public. As several scholars have noted (Gross, 2002; Reese, 2001; Starck, 1999), at this juncture the press needs to professionalize. The participants strongly echoed this demand for media professionalization.

**RQ4:** *What do they foresee in terms of press development in upcoming years? What progress/advancement would they like to see?*

Predictions for the future were less explicitly addressed in responses; rather, participants communicated their hopes of increased social responsibility and decreased economic dependence. They would like to see working codes of ethics implemented in newsrooms, and more legal protection for journalists and free expression (several mentioned crimes against journalists that don't often get prosecuted). As this is a pivotal moment for the press, it is hard to predict its future development; it can either embrace professionalism and strive for a more socially responsible ideal, or it can allow the economic market to dictate the terms of journalism.

The opinions of the participants revealed a great more than the perceived function of Bulgarian and Romanian media. Their interview responses illuminated the relationship between society and media in general; responsible media are essential to stable (in this case, democratic) societies, yet media can not professionally establish themselves until society provides somewhat stable conditions. Still, the media are a symbolic and practical mainstay in society. Even in the midst of the corrupt communist party press, citizens relied on newspapers – Bulgarians would read several newspapers daily to try to parse out the accurate information (Ognianova & Scott, 1997).

Furthermore, journalism must be understood in context, and the unique histories of these two nations necessitate special consideration of their media systems. When Communism dissolved and these countries began adopting democratic principles, worldwide dependence on a global free market was already firmly established. In contrast to many Western societies,

in which the press developed alongside an emerging market, Balkan societies were forced to quickly accept the terms of an established world market, and its press has had to negotiate its role in the face of strong economic pressures.

The Bulgarian and Romanian press also must confront the challenge of attracting readership in an era of declining interest in the print media industry. As J stated, within a few years the only viable media may be those that have successfully built up an online readership. Because information is so readily available on the internet from a variety of sources, there is diminishing incentive for the public to pay for paper-version newspaper subscriptions. Perhaps sensationalism, besides decreasing costs for publishers, is a way to develop and maintain a readership base. Despite such obstacles, however, the participants in this study had great respect for the institution of the press and its significance to a society.

## **CONCLUSION: THE STATE OF THE PRESS**

The press in Bulgaria and Romania is free and strong. It may not yet perform at an optimal level of professionalism, and it may report the news with more sensationalism than diligent reporting, but it is independent from government control. In the opinion of this study's participants, the press has improved significantly from communism and is now free to make its own editorial choices. The fact that respondents blamed journalists and editors for catering to economic influences signifies that it is indeed free from the paralyzing political control that it experienced under communist regimes.

Still, the press seems to place its own economic interests over the informational interests of the public, content to publish superficial sensationalist stories rather than invest resources in analytical, in-depth journalism. Furthermore, many press outlets are deficient in funding and in adequately trained personnel; perhaps they believe they are only capable of tabloid-style articles. Study participants strongly condemned these unprofessional tendencies. In fact, their responses referenced universal ideals of journalism that they assert need to be adopted in Bulgaria and Romania. The press should provide fortitude to the community, they claimed; the political, economic, and social realms of that community will improve along with the press. They judged their press systems harshly, but in challenging the contemporary norms they are again demonstrating the newfound power and freedom of the press – and the individual media worker.

The results of this study indicate that more research must be done. While the current media professional participants believe their press is lacking in investigative quality and true, uninhibited journalism, change has occurred since the 1990s, and most certainly continues to

take place. Researchers should continue to investigate Romanian and Bulgarian press through the lens of citizens and media professionals. More extensive long-interviews, comprised of more participants and further questions, should be conducted, perhaps with the intent to survey multiple regions of each country. Many respondents in this study live in metropolitan areas, and it would be valuable to see if opinions are similar in more rural areas. Country-specific analyses should be conducted, as well; while this study grouped the responses into a narrative of one 'press,' it would be interesting to see if comments on the print or other media differ among Eastern European countries.

Also, audience-analyses should be undertaken. How do citizens who are not professionally involved in the press evaluate their media? Several participants noted that media outlets *assume* the public's tastes and needs; what does the public really want to read? The press should not be defined exclusively by the journalists within it, but rather should progress based on society-wide values.

The key foundation of this study was its emphasis on using cultural standards to evaluate local institutions. While I referenced Western systems and models, I rejected comparing the Eastern European media to definitive Western standards. In her discussion of *The Dark Side of Comparative Research* (1991), Elli Lester-massman wrote that comparisons are means of emphasizing hierarchical power of nations. Comparative research defines Others in terms of how they differ from the dominant power's ideology, inherently contributing to political and cultural inequality.

International communication research in particular compares because there is a standard – of technologies, of access, of interpretation, of systems, of content – against which something else (the Other) is measured (p. 93).

Thus, it is critical to rely on citizens of Romania and Bulgaria to pass judgments on the press, to allow the media professionals of those countries to reveal the significant aspects of their media systems. While this study may have not been completely neutral, and may have occasionally formulated observations from an American perspective, every effort was made to let the voices of the respondents carry the analysis.

The respondents demanded professionalism and a commitment to public service from their press. While these are difficult objectives in a society that is attempting to embrace market ideals, the media professionals in the study believe it is their duty to uphold socially responsible ethics in their industry. Hopefully they will determine the future of the Balkan press.



4) Do you see any obstacles to press freedom in your country? Please describe.

5) To what people, groups, or institutions is the press currently responsible?

6) Are there economic struggles within the print media industry?

How does this influence news content and reporting?

7) Are new journalists adequately trained for their positions within the press?

8) Please share any other comments about the press in your country.

Thank you again for your participation. Your responses will be of great help to my thesis. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Consent Form**

#### **Purpose of Study:**

You have been selected to participate in a study on the current state of the press in Eastern Europe. It is of great importance that a community's press be evaluated by community standards; therefore, this analysis will be based upon the perceptions of journalists in Eastern Europe.

This study will focus on the nations of Romania, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. It will analyze the current press freedom in light of the fact that these are post-communist countries with economies, governments, and press systems that may still be in transition.

You were selected because you are a professional journalist in one of these nations. You have valuable opinions and insights about the press system in your particular nation.

#### **Description of Study:**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a short series of open-ended questions relating to press obstacles, press advances, press responsibilities, and press functions. We ask that you answer as many questions as possible, but if you feel uncomfortable with any you may leave the answer blank. Please be as thorough as possible, including specific examples. Feel free to write any opinions you have about the press; your contribution will remain anonymous. Please respond in English.

The length of time to complete the survey depends on how much information you include in your answer. If you agree to participate, you may be contacted with additional questions or clarification questions.

You may return your answers to the researchers via e-mail, fax, or airmail.

#### **Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any time you do not feel comfortable, you may decline to participate or ask that your responses not be used in the study.

You may choose not to answer a question, and may include as much or as little information as you would like. There are no penalties for not participating in the study, or for withdrawing your answers at any time.

**Risks of Being in the Study:**

There are no known risks to the participant. All responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. The study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

**Benefits of Being in the Study:**

If you choose to participate, you will express your own views on your nation's press. Your opinions will be respected and of great value to this study. There are no material benefits of participating in the study.

**Privacy:**

All responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. The research report will not include any personal, identifying details about any respondent. Your name will not be used in the report. You may decline to participate or retract your responses at any time.

All e-mail responses will be saved in a password protected file. Only the researcher will know the passwords to the e-mail account and to the protected file, and the researcher will sign out of the account and close the file whenever she is not at the computer. Electronic responses will be deleted once the study is complete. All faxed or airmailed paper responses will be kept in a private folder only accessed by the researchers.

Access to the records will be limited to the researcher; however, please note that the Institutional Review Board and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

The finished thesis will be uploaded at  
<http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/communication/special/honors/honorgrads.html>.

**Questions:**

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the researcher Lisa Cook at [cooklb@bc.edu](mailto:cooklb@bc.edu) or + (860) 214-2423 [United States], or her academic advisor Elfriede Fürsich at [fursich@bc.edu](mailto:fursich@bc.edu) or +(617) 552-1668 [United States].

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Boston College Office for Research Protections at (617) 552-4778 [United States].

**If you agree to participate, please click on the attached file <questions.doc>.**

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