

# MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

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# NORMATIVE ROLE CONCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISTS IN AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to explore and provide a better understanding of how journalists who work in a non-free media environment that is characterized by high level of state involvement conceptualize normative journalistic roles. This study used in-depth qualitative interviewing to explore opinions of journalists who live and work in Belarus. Normative theories of the media, concepts of news media and democracy as well as the literature on the roles of news media in authoritarian regimes guide the paper theoretically. The findings of the study demonstrated that Belarusian journalists have similar understandings of normative roles as their colleagues in democratic nations. Exclusive for the orientations of journalists from state-run news organizations were mouthpiece and ideological/propagandistic roles. Certain roles were described as encompassing different goals by the representatives of state-run and independent news media. The study revealed that roles of journalism that help support the social ideal as understood by journalists in this autocratic country could be described as having two mostly competing directions: one that reflects the ideal of the nation's development toward free society and representative democracy and another direction that represents the ideal of protecting the status quo, sustaining conformity in the society, and preserving national security.*

Keywords: normative journalistic roles ▪ democracy ▪ press freedom.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For many decades scholars of news media have been connecting types of socio-political systems with the ways news media are expected to operate (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Baker, 2002; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Christians et al., 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2012, among others). Despite the diversity of approaches, most of these works, however, until a few recent years explored normative roles of journalists mainly in democratic nations with a focus on Western countries. The Worlds of Journalism Study project that was founded in 2010 led the efforts on expanding the map of journalism studies, and the recent collection of studies analyzed data from 27,500

journalists in 67 countries (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad & De Beer, 2019b). Still, scholars recognize that “the Western dominance and researchers’ uneven coverage of world regions have had notable consequences for our understanding of journalism” (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019a, p. 6). In thinking about normative journalistic roles, it is essential to overcome western bias and predetermined framing in journalism studies to go beyond an understanding of a journalistic normativity as singular and recognize a potential multiplicity of normative approaches (Zelizer, 2009; Nerone, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of how journalists who work in a non-free media environment that is characterized by high level of state involvement conceptualize normative journalistic roles. This manuscript represents a part of the bigger project that also looked at institutional roles and daily reporting practices and the gap between normative expectations and described journalistic practices (or, in other words, the project explored the ideal roles as described by journalists, perceived actual practices, and the gap between the two). This study uses in-depth qualitative interviewing, one of the fundamental methods for learning about the experiences of others, to explore personal experiences, practices, and opinions of journalists who live and work in Belarus.

After a brief period of democratization in Belarus in the early 1990s, authoritarian rule consolidated in the late 1990s. With the support of cheap energy from Russia, Belarus transitioned from competitive authoritarianism to a full-scale authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way, 2002). The state has monopolized subscription, distribution and broadcasting services. It also owns the main broadcast media and socio-political newspapers with largest circulations while applying policies that limit activities of the non-state press (Klaskouski, 2011). Government control over news media is enforced through libel law, politicized registration and licensing of mass media outlets, and economic pressure. In the past year, workers in news media organizations experienced intensified levels of harassment and violence, especially during political unrest in Belarus that started in the fall of 2020. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, only in 2020, 477 journalists were detained by law enforcement and in total spent more than 1,200 days in jails (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2020).

Broadly, mass media system in the country could be described as having two major forms of mass media: (1) state-run media, which constitute the majority of socio-political print outlets, TV, and radio stations, and (2) independent (i.e. not supported by government subsidies) news media. Broadcast media are predominantly state-run (with the exception of news media that operate from abroad, such as Bel-sat TV), with some commercial broadcast media that are either entertainment-oriented or have smaller audiences. However, it is important to note that independent news organizations dominate online and in the last few years have experienced an increase in readership and popularity. The state-run media receive subsidies in various forms, including allocation of advertising, and experience direct involvement

of various authorities (for example, city council or the president administration) in their editorial practices, which results in exclusively favorable coverage of governmental offices and in absence of alternative voices or pluralism. The independent media are mostly privately owned, have more editorial freedom, and vary greatly on the degree of profit interest. These two types of news media have led to the emergence of two different journalistic settings, including two professional journalistic associations (Jarolimek, 2009). Studying experiences of Belarusian journalists both from state-run and independent news media represents an exceptional opportunity to provide an insight into reporters' normative orientations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Normative Theories of the Media

During the early communication research era in the U.S., political scientists studied normative roles of the press, or how the press ought to operate to sustain political order, democracy in particular (Zelizer, 2011). The landmark work "Four Theories of the Press" (1956) by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm is considered to be the first comprehensive attempt to conduct a systematic normative analysis of how the press operates in various social and political environments. The authors argued that social and political structures influence the form press systems take and explained the logic and functioning of the press according to four systems, or theories: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet communist. "Four Theories of the Press" was later criticized for its inherent ideological bias and its theoretical framework being shaped by Cold War mentality and industrial capitalism (Nerone, 1995).

Another, more recent, comprehensive work on normative theories of the media by Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) presented a framework based on three levels of analysis: normative orientations on a philosophical level, types of democracies on a political level, and roles of mass media on a media level. At the philosophical level, the authors discussed corporatist, libertarian, social responsibility, and citizen participation normative traditions while elaborating on fundamental issues, moral foundations, major actors, and functions of normative theory of communication. The book described principles and practices of four models of democracy (administrative, pluralist, civic, and direct) and presented four roles of media (monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative) in contemporary democratic context.

Similarly, Baker (2002) described how roles of the media differ in an elitist, liberal pluralist, republican, and complex democracies. For example, in a liberal pluralist democracy, mass media are segmented and partisan, socially responsible, and may serve an advocacy role for different groups and institutions, with a watchdog role being one of the most important ones. For a republican democracy, news media are reflective and discursive, inclusive in the pursuit of a common good, civil, balanced,

and comprehensive and expected to facilitate discussion and collaboration among various groups of the society.

Although normative theories and roles of media described in this section belong to democratic tradition, the range and diversity of those principles and orientations allow to establish various normative role orientations that become prominent under certain political circumstances, such as different types of democracy. This literature also sets a background for exploration of normative roles of journalists in non-democratic environments. Next, it is important to describe social-political tasks of the media in a democracy identified in the literature and how the concept of democracy itself is discussed in relation to journalistic practices around the world.

## 2.2. Roles of News Media in a Democracy

For the specific primary democratic tasks of the media, Curran (2005) identified the following four tasks: to inform, scrutinize, debate, and represent. In more detail, Schudson (2008) described the following seven functions of journalism in a democracy: information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, provision of a public forum, mobilization, and promotion of representative democracy.

Scholars of journalism studies also highlighted a particular importance of looking not at how the media should serve democracy, but at the actual pragmatic performance of such normative expectations in a given democratic society (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009). A criticism of the actual practices of performing normative roles, such as a watchdog role, was voiced, among others, by Bennett and Serrin (2005) who argued that the watchdog role of journalism has been weakly institutionalized in daily routines of the press in the United States. Commercial pressures, understaffed newsrooms, lack of time, increasing conglomeration, and an unsupportive public are the reasons the press failed to perform a watchdog role (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). The disruption of traditional journalism models by digital technology, including social media, also “raises clear risks for professional journalists and institutions” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, p. 811).

Thinking about the usefulness of the concept of democracy in journalism studies, we need to turn to the article “How much democracy does journalism need?” by Josephi (2013) who argued that journalists should not be equated with the governments of the countries where they work and journalism should not be limited to journalistic practices only in democratic regimes. The author noted that some of orientations and role conceptions of journalists in non-democratic nations are quite similar to the ones of journalists in democratic countries. The article called for a closer look at specific practices and the ways news workers seek to provide journalistic services by reporting accurate and verified information, which is what this current study offers.

### 2.3. Empirical Studies of Journalism Cultures and Journalistic Roles

Apart from theorizing about the normative roles of journalism in democracy, scholars of journalism studies explored orientations of journalists focusing on other aspects as well (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The study that mapped journalism cultures across nations showed that some principles, such as detachment, non-involvement, presenting information on important political processes, and monitoring government, were perceived as important across all regime types while interventionism, or “the extent to which journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 372), was more important in developing societies and transitional democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) conceptualized journalistic roles as discursive constructs of journalism’s identity and place in society. They suggested that journalists exercise important roles in two domains: political life and everyday life. Within the political domain, the authors identified roles that address six essential needs: informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, developmental-educative, and collaborative-facilitative. In the everyday domain were three areas: consumption, identity, and emotion.

To explore the whole range of normative roles, in this study respondents addressed roles in the domains of political and everyday life. The next section provides a brief overview of how these and other aspects of mass media functioning in non-democratic regimes were described in the literature.

### 2.4. Roles of News Media in Authoritarian Regimes

The normative role of the press in earlier European authoritarian regimes was control over the society for the purpose of maintaining the established political order (McNair, 2009). Restrictive licensing, libel, and copyright laws were used to control information and minimize its destabilizing effect. With the development of new forms of news media, the range of the roles expanded.

In recent literature, the use of mass media in non-democracies has been described, for example, as a tactic of rule that authoritarian leaders employ to extend the regimes’ durability, mostly by preventing the appearance of alternative power centers and marginalizing alternative political movements and actors or by eliminating collective action potential (for example, King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; Walker & Orttung, 2014). Legitimization of incumbents is achieved by favorable coverage of regimes and policies, absence of critique, and depiction of success and harmony in a given country (Prekevicius, 2005; Karaliova, 2013). Regimes use mass media for the ideological purpose of shaping political discourse in such nations as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Iran. In this process, they rely on consumerism, anti-Western and anti-revolutionary rhetoric, and nationalism (Miazhevich, 2007; Prekevicius, 2005; Walker & Orttung, 2014).

After the establishment of the communist regime, the mass media system in China largely followed the Soviet model, according to which news outlets were considered a “mouthpiece” of the communist party. Between the 1980s and 1990s, mass media in China experienced a period of transformation and diversification when rapid development followed post-Mao’s market-oriented socioeconomic reforms (Huang, 2001). Today, the country has one of the most dynamic media markets in the world, with more strictly controlled political and ideological aspects and less controlled economic aspects of news media (Qin, Stromberg & Wu, 2014). This was described by Walker and Orttung (2014) as a “quasi-commercial media environment in which the party-state retains a dominant editorial hand” (p. 73).

State-run and private news media cover the same events and actors differently. For example, in their study that looked at how news media covered uprisings in Egypt, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) found that three types of news outlets (state-run, semiofficial, and independent newspapers) told completely different stories about the same historical events by choosing different frames to portray protestors, causes and consequences of the events, as well as proposed solutions.

Still, viewing the role of mass media in authoritarian regimes as a purely propagandistic tool would be an oversimplification. Recent studies have shown that many political, economic, and societal factors need to be considered to adequately describe and understand such roles. For example, some current autocratic regimes may choose to tolerate existence of both state-run and commercial media that serve as a source of more diverse information (Qin, Stromberg & Wu, 2014). Similarly, according to Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009), resource-poor dictatorships may tolerate free media because they “allow a dictator to provide incentives to bureaucrats and therefore to improve the quality of government” (p. 645).

In light of the reviewed literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

How do journalists from a non-democratic regime conceptualize normative roles of journalism in the society and how do their opinions differ based on their affiliation with state-run and independent news media?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative interviewing as a research method that documents rich accounts of experiences, knowledge, and ideas (Alvesson, 2011). In-depth interviews help develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, and describe processes, or “grasp a situation from the inside” (Weiss, 1994, p. 10). Because of the highly restricted and controlled environment in Belarus, there were potential risks for the researcher who travelled to Belarus to conduct part of the interviews. Depending on participants’ availability during fieldwork time in Belarus, interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, with snowball sampling used to recruit participants for the project.

The snowball sampling methodology was selected for two reasons. First, in an effort to eliminate any potential risks of any form of punishment for respondents, it was decided that the researcher's professional background and experience of working as a journalist in Belarus would allow to be cognizant and careful in selecting first participants who trust her and will be willing to participate. Second, after each interview a participant was asked to share information or talk to two-three colleagues from other news organizations who never met the researcher previously and introduce the topic of the study to secure preliminary consent to participate. Then the researcher reached out to those participants to explain the goals of the study in details. Extensive efforts were made to include participants of various backgrounds, political and ideological views, and positions in newsrooms.

The participants for this study were 19 news reporters and editors who work for daily mainstream newspapers and online media in Minsk as well as seven experts (media critics, journalism professors, and media law experts). The researcher kept recruiting and interviewing participants until theoretical saturation was reached. In total, 26 people from 12 news organizations were interviewed. The ratio of journalists from state-run and independent news media was 10 to 9, accordingly. The age of respondents was between 24 and 66 years old, with 13 female and 13 male respondents. Considering potential risks for respondents, the names of participants as well as the names of news organizations were not revealed, and all identifying information was stored securely with only the researcher having access to it. To maintain confidentiality, gender and other characteristics of participants' identities or work were randomized or concealed in the written report.

Interviews lasted from around an hour to an hour and a half, and participants were asked, for example, to describe the main roles of journalism in the society as they see them, to identify the three most important roles of journalists, or to share their thoughts on how their colleagues from other Belarusian news media would prioritize these roles. During the interviews, examples and the exchange of details were encouraged.

Constant comparative method of analysis as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to analyze the texts of the interviews.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

This report on how Belarusian journalists describe their normative professional roles in the society was structured according to two domains where journalists exercise their roles: the domain of political life and the domain of everyday life (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). The roles are listed in the order of prominence, or how many interviewees named them and how important they thought the roles were overall.

#### 4.1. Domain of Political Life

In the domain of political life, the roles most named by the respondents, in the descending order of prominence, were the role of providing information, educational role, watchdog role, providing commentary, and serving as mouthpiece. A mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, the role of providing a tribune for public discussion/dialogue, and promotion of democratic values were mentioned in fewer interviews.

**Providing information.** Providing information to the audience was by far the most often named role. Importantly, journalists often spoke about journalistic norms important for this role, such as objectivity, pluralism, truthfulness, impartiality, and balanced reporting. A journalist from an independent news organization said:

First, the main role of journalism in the society is to inform people. Foremost, it is providing objective and balanced information that allows people to make decisions and draw conclusions so that members of the society could make decisions on their own how they want to live and evolve.

In normative terms, the role of informing was named as important because it provides the society with tools necessary for decision-making and, hence, improvement of people's lives. This discursive strategy of journalists empowering their audiences with knowledge for their own good reappeared several times in the description of other roles as well, such as educational and watchdog roles, and providing commentary.

Talking about specificity of this role in Belarus, another journalist working for an independent news organization noted that in a democratic society, providing information would be the most important role of journalists, but this is probably different for Belarus, where the role of mediator and ideological/propagandistic role in some cases becomes more important.

Although journalists working for both state-run and independent media agreed on the importance of providing information, some respondents emphasized a more active role of reporters in doing so. Providing objective information and diverse opinions, according to one respondent working for an independent news organization, is a journalist's "job and duty," even if someone, like "an official, a propagandistic machine or another stakeholder," is trying to distort it. This is an example of a politicization discursive strategy, or description of a normative role using terms of political struggle, to legitimize this function as essential in the society.

**Educational role.** An educational role of journalism, as described by the respondents, included such functions as education, enlightenment, improvement of legal awareness, and moral education. For example, one journalist from a state-run news organization spoke about explanatory journalism and the importance of explaining complicated issues by organizing hotlines and having Q&A sections on their

website. Another journalist working for a state-run newspaper emphasized the goal of improving legal awareness of audiences, particularly regarding consumer rights. In this sense, she said, journalists serve as actors protecting consumers from unfair practices of businesses. Here and later, the educational role was described as legitimate because journalists represent the public interests, thus enabling fairness in the society.

Moral education or, as one journalist from state-run newspaper put it, “making people better,” was an idea discussed by some respondents. This function, according to one interviewee, includes “education, improvement of moral principles, testing those principles by some theoretical situations, provoking a person to evaluate some events and other people’s behavior, to think critically, to develop higher standards and more noble standards of behavior.” On the other side, another news reporter from an independent news organization delegitimized the role of moral education by discursively shifting responsibility from journalists to the public and describing a more detached role of journalism. This opinion hints about the division over how news workers view their actual roles and practices regarding interventionism in the journalistic community in Belarus.

#### **Watchdog role, journalism as fourth estate, and help in solving problems.**

While both journalists working for state-run and independent media spoke about the first two roles in almost all interviews, a watchdog role (as well as a conception of journalism as a fourth estate) was described mainly by journalists working for independent news organizations and only mentioned by journalists working for state-run news organizations on very few occasions.

A watchdog role of journalism as conceptualized by respondents included several aspects defining journalisms’ functions and specifics of role enactment in Belarus. Several journalists working for independent news organizations and one journalist working for a state-run media said they supported the concept of journalism as a fourth estate. In the words of one respondent, journalism as a fourth power serves as “an independent public institution that controls the state, on one hand, and impacts moral beliefs of citizens, on another hand.”

The watchdog function is especially important in Belarus, said another reporter from an independent news organization:

In situations when other parts of the system of checks and balances, other branches of the government, do not fulfill their functions, when there is a predominant branch of government in totalitarian countries, and in our case it is executive branch, or, more precisely, presidential institution, – then parliaments and courts do not fulfill their functions of checks and balances for that government.

Here and elsewhere, journalists used the discursive strategy of dramatization to highlight the importance of the watchdog role in the society, and in the Belarusian

society in particular. This was also observed in the following example when another journalist from an independent news organization, while also expressing her belief about the importance of the watchdog role for Belarusian journalists, said it is not because of the type of regime but despite the type of regime that the role should be exercised:

I support the idea of journalism as a fourth estate and I think that even in a harshest dictatorship it could be put in practice. Of course, sometimes we have to step on our own song's throat, such as for example, limit ourselves in certain social benefits, in having a 'decent' work at a government institution, in a salary or in some comfortable environment of editorial office or something like that. But this is important.

On few occasions, journalists also recognized that it is not only government officials that journalists need to keep accountable but also those in power in a broader sense, such as business owners or top clergy.

Some journalists, especially ones from state-run media that are not supposed to be critical of government, avoided using terms such as “watchdog,” “keeping accountable,” or “criticizing” but spoke instead about how news reporters often help solve people's problems and represent their interests, or, as one respondent put it, “defend people's interest when they are powerless in dealing with government officials.” In those responses, journalists were again described as representatives of the public's interests who facilitate fairness and help improve the lives of people, which helped legitimize a modified version of the watchdog role for state-run media.

One journalist noted that news workers often help solve problems “if not directly then by calling attention of the society to it.” The origin of this “help in solving problems” function and the reason it was so prominent in journalists' responses could be explained by the existing bureaucratic system of government that is characterized by the lack of transparency and accountability.<sup>1</sup> Several respondents noted that in Belarus, the watchdog role is often underperformed, especially in state-run media that refrain from any critique of the government or only provide an “approved” type or amount of such critique because of the fear of retaliation.

**Commentary and public opinion formation.** Commentary together with public opinion formation were mostly mentioned by journalists working for state-run media. Several respondents spoke about a growing importance in today's media environment of providing the public with analysis of events and said that commentary allows news media to create a certain impactful picture of the world.

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1 According to the Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, Belarus received a score of 40 on the scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) and was among the countries and territories “where citizens face the tangible impact of corruption on a daily basis,” including “untrustworthy and badly functioning public institutions like the police and judiciary,” as well as bribery and indifference of authorities. (See [http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2016](http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016))

Some interviewees assigned a somewhat paternalistic role to journalists providing commentary. For example, one journalist was describing the role of providing analysis of current events and facts as an “attempt to rise above the crowd, meaning not only to protect the people but also to guide them if they are confused....” Another news reporter described journalists as possessors of particular knowledge that they share with a public that “doesn’t know or doesn’t want to know” about certain complex issues. These two examples illustrate how journalists discursively enabled news workers as agents “protecting” the people for their own good. Quite often, journalists were talking about a type of commentary with a stronger persuasive or, as they described it, ideological component, which is discussed further in the subsection on an ideological/propagandistic role.

**Mouthpiece role and legitimization of power.** The mouthpiece role, although never openly labeled this way, was mentioned mostly by journalists from state-run news organizations. Communication of government stances on different issues is essential in the society, said one journalist, otherwise “the position of government offices becomes unclear.” That respondent also said: “There could be different rumors about some important projects in the society, and if there is no official position and no official comments about it, then the rumors will grow and grow... which could be quite destructive.” This example shows how the mouthpiece role is legitimized as an important normative role that helps prevent rumors.

However, some journalists were not sure if serving as a mouthpiece for government by extensively covering events of various public offices could be considered a role of journalism as such and if it is all that necessary, especially in the scope in which it currently exists at their news organizations. One journalist from a state-run newspaper said:

I don’t know if this could be called a role... Of course, we cover lots of public events and activities [organized by government offices]. But these news stories do not actually fulfill any educational role and do not help form any opinion. They are just news stories that could as well not be written at all...

When talking later in the interviews about the changes they would want to make at their news media, some journalists said that they actually want less of these “official” news stories because they all look the same and nobody is interested in them, thus discursively acknowledging superficial character of the mouthpiece role.

Another aspect of serving as a mouthpiece for the government, namely legitimization of power, was described by a journalist working for an independent news organization when he spoke about the roles state-run media fulfil in the society:

State-run mass media do not control power. They legitimize power... When officials enforce another clearly unfair tax, then independent mass media defend people’s interests and report on why this tax is bad and why it should

not exist or how people's rights and the constitution are violated. And state-run media provide commentary by officials that allows a spin in such a way that it shows how this law is fair and we need it.

In this example, a journalist denied a normative character of the role of legitimization of power and, furthermore, highlighted the potential damage for the society this role could make.

A similar message about power legitimization, but this time with a completely opposite connotation, was shared by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who said that one of the important roles is to “lead [the public] to a certain way of thinking, to explain some processes” and to serve as agents between the public and the state to help avoid tension. In this way, the legitimization of power role was justified and presented as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society.

**Mediator role.** Journalists serve as mediators between people and authorities and provide opportunities for dialogue. Journalism in this sense is “a bridge between those in power and people because it allows people to reach out to an official directly and ask some questions,” said one journalist working for an independent news organization. The idea of mass media, in particular independent news organizations, serving as an institution that allows for the feedback from people to be heard, was supported by a respondent who said that it is extremely important in societies where “it is very hard to know what people think without fair and balanced elections.” Therefore, news media serve as a “last communication channel between the society and the government.”

Although the mediator role was also mentioned by journalists working for state-run media, it was described as having other goals, such as dialogue facilitation and reconciliation between social groups, not just the government and the people. In this sense, journalists often assume a more active role as conciliators. For example, one journalist said that he always tried to find ways to “solve people's problems” by reaching out to officials to allow them to respond or offer a solution before writing a story. He said: “Many people say that a journalist should be on the people's side. But I see that in the government there are people as well.”

Similarly, another journalist from a state-run newspaper said that he does not approve of adversarial questioning of officials in interviews: “I am his [an official's] friend and helper on air, because I am a journalist. ... I am a bridge between the society and that official, but I can help him to figure it out and give a response, although it's his response.” This journalist also expressed his frustration with how independent media, as he said, often attack government officials even when such attacks are not justified. By presenting an alternative view on how journalists should position themselves regarding government officials, i.e. not as adversaries but as colleagues, journalists from state-run media were able to legitimize the mediator role and explain why it is important in their view.

**Ideological and propagandistic roles.** Ideological and propagandistic roles were described in three types of responses: when journalists working for independent news organizations were talking about state-run media; when journalists working for state-run media denied playing such roles; and when journalists working for state-run media acknowledged it.

In the first case, respondents said that state-run media often play a propagandistic role, or work as a PR-service for government. When doing so, one interviewee said, they “do not cover issues unfavorable for the government.” Journalists from independent news media delegitimized the ideological role by labeling it ‘propaganda,’ or ‘PR,’ or by highlighting the factitious character of news coverage.

Some journalists working for state-run media either denied or did not name the ideological and propagandistic roles as notable for their work. At the same time, some other journalists did in fact acknowledge the importance of the ideological role for them. One respondent, for example, said that state-run news media serve as providers of state ideology and viewpoints and are needed in the society as “an element of national security” that helps keep the society within certain boundaries. Another news reporter described the role while expressing his obvious frustration and struggling to articulate the role in normative terms:

For example, now I work for a state-run newspaper and we represent the interests of the government. Like when X [name of the government official] told us to write about things that would distract people from their everyday problems. So it is probably an ideological role... If they would tell us to mislead readers then we would probably try to mislead readers. This is some kind of unhealthy role... I don't know how to name it...

Notably, another interviewee who also acknowledged the importance of an ideological role of journalism, normalized the notion by expressing his belief that this role is inherent for all mass media, including ones in other countries. This discursive strategy of normalizing the role, while making it appear to be globally acceptable and needed to preserve the national security, helped present it as legitimate.

**Tribune for public discussion/dialogue.** Although somewhat similar to the mediator role, the role of tribunal for public discussion/dialogue gives more power directly to community members to speak about issues that are significant for them, which, according to one journalist from an independent news organization, news media need to provide a platform for. The journalist shared an example of how their organization is doing that in a series of news stories devoted to certain problems or questions asked by their readers. This discursive strategy of empowering the public with deliberation opportunities highlighted the normative side of the role. Another respondent emphasized the importance of journalists becoming a part of public discussion and facilitating an interactive dialogue with audience members: “Today a journalist is more included in this public discussion than ever before .... His goal is

to recognize the audience he is working for, to communicate with it in an interactive mode, online, using new media platforms.”

One more aspect of serving as a tribune for public discussion was emphasized by a journalist working for a state-run newspaper who spoke about newspaper columns with letters from readers as an outlet for feedback and frustration. Here again, like for the role of legitimization of power, the tribune for public discussion role is presented by state-run media as normative because it helps sustain peace and conformity in the society and prevents discontent.

**Promoting democratic values.** Promotion of democratic values was not a very prominent theme as it was mentioned only by two journalists working for independent news media in their descriptions of normative roles. However, both of them felt quite strongly about it and clearly expressed their views that journalists, as one respondent said, must “promote tolerance, stand up to stagnant thinking, totalitarianism, and racism, and promote freedom of speech and expression.” This role, another interviewee said, is central for news reporters, especially in Belarus:

The most important thing for journalists is, according to their constitutional rights and the Mass Media Law, to provide all information about civic values, about true democratic values. This is especially [important] for journalists working in a country that is so far from these democratic values. I believe that this is very important because everything depends on that, our present and our future depends on that.

In this example, the role was presented as legitimate by reference to media law and the constitution, thus transferring normativity of legal status to the status of the role. Both journalists who highlighted the role as important were about the same age, in their 30s, during the interviews, held senior positions in their respective newsrooms, and faced persecutions for their professional activity in the past.

#### 4.2. Domain of Everyday Life

The two roles in the domain of everyday life described by respondents were service and entertainment. These roles were not as prominent as ones in the domain of political life and were listed last among the roles of journalism in the society by the participants.

**Service function.** The label “service” itself was used by only one respondent, a news media expert, while other respondents vaguely described the role using terms such as “applicable” or “useful” news, or “providing helpful information,” or news stories that are “closer to people.” A media expert said that the service role is de facto the most prominent role played by many Belarusian mass media because writing about politics is “painful and risky, and service brings money and does not lead to problems with the government.” For local news organizations, the expert said, this

could be translated into practices when they do not cover important issues that could help their audiences make informed decisions. Sometimes these local news organizations could write news stories criticizing the president but not local authorities, because it could endanger relationships with them. While an overall service function is in fact important, the interviewee said, mass media should be playing other roles as well:

Everyone needs [to play] a service role. But there should be other roles as well. And these other roles are not easy ones and not very safe for news organizations to fulfill. Therefore, quite often they give up on those roles, directly or by devaluating them to rehearsal of news reported by BelTA<sup>2</sup> or something like that, so they do not do any editorial work of their own regarding this.

Notably, state-run journalists considered this service role important because this “applicable” type of news provided a sense of being useful for their readers, which highlighted the role’s normative character and importance for people. For example, one news reporter said, “Judging by the feedback from the readers, ... we need more stories that would be helpful for people and more applicable in their lives. For example, where to invest money or something like that...”

This aspect of the service function was highlighted by several other journalists who also thought that this “applicable” type of news is expected and particularly appreciated by the audience.

**Entertainment.** Entertainment as a role of journalism and journalists, although not necessarily viewed as a normative role per se, was acknowledged as an important one by several respondents. The role was usually mentioned last in the journalists’ lists of roles. Some of them explained that they talk about it because they believe it is important for their audiences. For example, one journalist said:

The role of entertainment is probably the third one. Just because you asked about the roles that are important for the society. This might be not important for me ... but I understand that it might be important, considering circulations, ratings of entertainment stories, that such stories are popular, which means they are important for consumers.

Another respondent noted that the prominence of the entertainment role is explained by the changes in the media environment and appearance of new media, which shifts focus from other functions of journalism to entertainment.

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2 BelTA, or Belarusian Telegraph Agency, is a state-run news agency, or “the country’s official news agency” that serves as a “source of up-to-the-minute news about Belarus’ supreme authorities.” (See [http://eng.belta.by/about\\_company/](http://eng.belta.by/about_company/))

## 5. WHAT IS JOURNALISM/JOURNALISTS?

Although not initially a part of the interview guide, this question emerged as a noteworthy subject for discussion as respondents were expressing their views on how their colleagues in other news organizations view normative roles of journalists. Such discussions also included questions about the central, or critical, roles and practices that are essential for news workers to be considered journalists.

Some journalists from independent news organizations believed that their colleagues working for state-run media do not fulfill the watchdog role and, therefore, questioned their legitimacy as professionals. For example, one reporter said:

In the strict sense of the word, I would not call them journalists. They are rather “staff members [of a public office].” Because in one or another way journalism means performing these functions, foremost monitoring the power. When a journalist works as a mouthpiece for government, essentially just delivering their decisions, this is a bit of a different job. This is the job that in business is called, I don’t know, PR, and for the government it could be called propaganda or providing information.

Though not frequently, this view was expressed by other interviewees who called their colleagues who work for state-run media “service employees” or “propagandists.” However, this was rarely as strongly worded as in the excerpt above and overall journalists from state-run media were not denied their legitimacy as journalists.

According to a Belarusian media expert, journalism that does not fulfill a watchdog function, does not represent readers’ interests and limits its role to service journalism is still journalism; it is just not free:

I think this is also journalism, but it is not entirely free journalism. Because in their editorial offices journalists still discuss important news and events that impact their lives, but they do not have courage to write about it. Local news organizations, for example, do not have courage to write about national politics because national politics is mostly done in Minsk. Or, for example, if local authorities make an unpopular decision they [local news organizations] do not write about it because they don’t want to damage their relationships. ... But they realize that this is self-censorship and that they are not allowed to do certain things. So, this is still journalism but journalism with self-censorship.

It is important to note that more than half of the respondents recognized that there are some true professionals working in both types of news organizations.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The hierarchy of normative roles described by Belarusian journalists turned to be quite similar to the hierarchy of normative roles of their colleagues in other countries. Notably, respondents mentioned most of the roles that are described in the literature as essential ones for democracy, namely providing information, investigation, commentary, serving as a public forum, and promoting democratic values (Curran, 2005; McNair, 2009; Schudson, 2008). The three roles that became prominent in the specific circumstances of an autocratic regime were a mediator role, ideological/propagandistic role, and serving as a mouthpiece. These roles were defined by participants as normative because they help prevent rumors, sustain peace and conformity in the society, and preserve national security. In addition, respondents highlighted the interventionist character of some roles and underemphasized the roles in the domain of everyday life, namely a service function and entertainment, which is also similar to the roles described in the literature on journalists' normative roles perceptions in other countries.

Thinking about the four normative roles of media in a democracy discussed by Christians et al. (2009), namely monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative, the hierarchy of role orientations of journalists in Belarus suggests prevalence of the monitorial role mainly for independent news media. The facilitative and radical roles were also more important for journalists from independent news media while a collaborative role was more pronounced in the discourses of journalists from state-run newspapers. This study positions the two types of news media, independent and state-run, on adversarial/monitorial vs. loyal/collaborative poles of role orientations, respectively (Figure 1). This division, however, should not be viewed as an absolute one because respondents suggested modified versions of some adversarial/monitorial roles, which state-run news media are not able to fulfill. For example, journalists spoke about a modified version of the watchdog role as "helping people solve their problems" or journalists being "representatives of the people." In addition, the study showed that certain normative roles that are important for democracies can attain a different meaning in a non-democratic regime. For example, while a mediator role is important in democratic countries, in an autocracy it becomes prominent in another way, as the last communication channel between the citizens and the government in the society with a less transparent government.

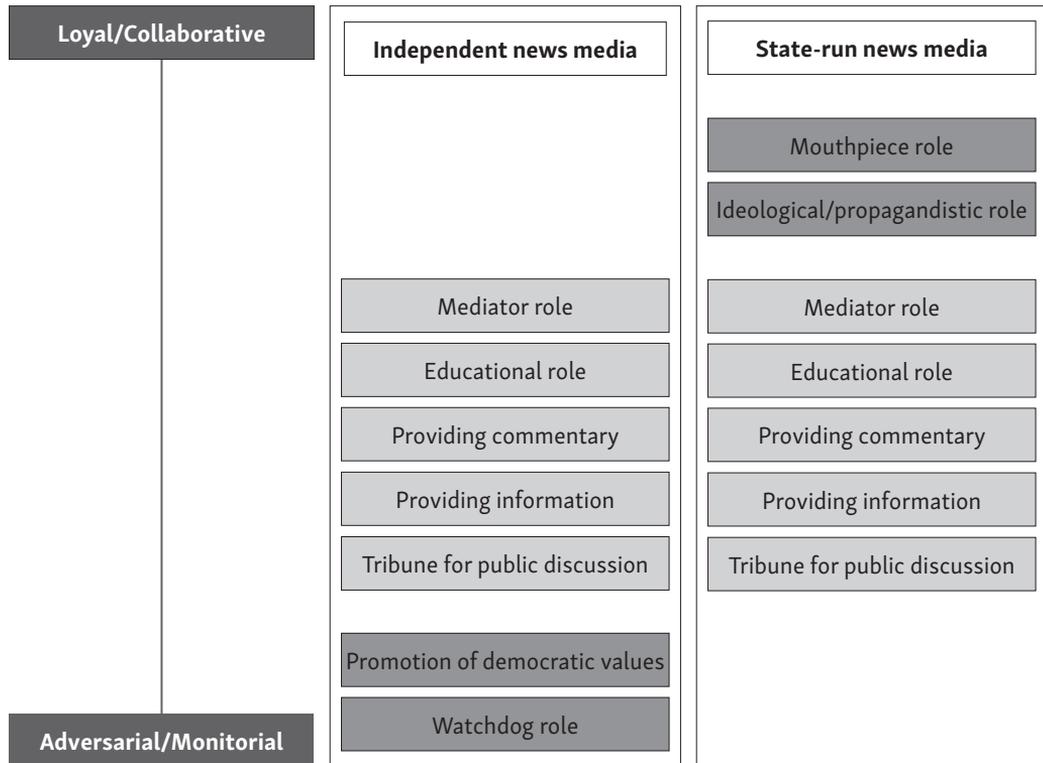


Figure 1. Normative role orientations of journalists from independent and state-run news media.

Speaking in terms of normative theory, the roles of journalism that help support the social ideal as understood by journalists working in this particular regime cannot be described as having one direction or goal. Instead, these roles represented two mostly competing directions. One direction in this case reflects the ideal of the nation's development toward representative democracy, which is characterized by the society of informed and concerned citizens who participate in deliberation processes and make informed decisions. Another direction represents the ideal of protecting the status quo, sustaining peace and conformity in the society and preserving national security. These two directions are reflective of the two normative understandings of the roles of journalism, or how the press ought to operate to promote or sustain certain political order (Zelizer, 2011), a democracy and an autocracy in this case. It is important to mention that these two directions might become more or less prominent in news media depending on specific political conditions in the country and in the world. For example, during the Crimean crisis in Ukraine, in the light of uncertainty about Russia's intentions toward Belarus, the direction of preserving the integrity of the country by supporting conformity and peace in Belarus and sustaining the status quo might have appeared as a preferable option for certain news outlets.

Although socialization of Belarusian journalists is not the focus of the study, one can observe the impact of media globalization and diffusion of journalistic norms and orientations on how news workers in non-Western countries view their roles and norms (Cottle, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Reese, 2008). The numerous workshops, seminars, educational trips, and meetings of Belarusian journalists with their colleagues in Europe, as well as the globalization effect of social media and other new media platforms seem to have had its impact on how journalists describe their understanding of normative journalistic roles. This socialization in a global context and adherence of Belarusian journalists to the public trustee model of journalism also speaks to the globalization of the professional logic (Waisbord, 2013). At the same time, journalists' commitment to collaborative, interventionist, and advocacy roles demonstrates a hybridization of professional culture of Belarusian journalists.

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