

Contesting or carrying on the past? (Dis-)Continuities of journalistic roles, practices and ethics from autocracy to democracy

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Journalism is a shaper of democratization processes, and media transformation into democratic institutions is considered a prerequisite for the successful democratization of a society. However, media systems and organizations are not created from scratch after the breakdown of old regimes. Instead, existing ones are contested and reshaped, with residual constraints. Likewise, professional journalism does not start with regime change. Although journalistic personnel are partially removed during transition, many journalists remain in their profession. These journalists build on their professional experience, identities, and standards developed under the old regime. These ‘legacies of the past’ are contested, adjusted and merged with new values and practices, leading to hybrid forms of journalism. However, how professional discourses of the past are strategically mobilized and contested, has hardly been empirically investigated.

This paper investigates how journalists perceive the (dis)continuities of journalistic practices, roles and ethics after regime change. Which historical professional discourses are contested (discontinued) or reproduced (continued)? Why do legacies and fundamental ‘reboots’ exist, which strategies of mobilizing or contesting the past lie behind? What are the consequences for the journalistic profession and (its role within) the democratization process?

Methodologically, the paper builds on a comparative study within the EU-funded project ‘Media, Conflict and Democratisation’ (www.mecodem.eu), which explores journalistic work practices, ethics, roles, and working conditions across a set of democratisation conflicts. The study includes in-depth interviews with 76 print, online and TV journalists from Kenya, Serbia and South Africa.

Findings show that continuities exist within journalistic work practices: routines in the selection of topics, investigation and presentation of stories, once learned and memorized through years of professional training and experience, are transferred into the democratic order. Conversely, journalists claim that ‘juniorization’ of newsrooms in light of economic pressures leads to decreasing “institutional memory” and know-how to cover democratization conflicts as many journalists have not experienced the authoritarian past and lack historical background.

Within role perceptions, discontinuities seem to prevail, as many journalists perceive themselves as watchdogs, mediators of an inclusive public debate and fighters for sustainable democratization. In contrast, continuities can be detected, as various Serbian journalists claim that collaborative was practiced in early transition years where journalists felt committed to supporting the new democratic regime. Self-censorship reported by Kenyan journalists when

covering ethnic and political tensions can be interpreted as continuing political parallelism and partisan journalism.

Journalists in transitional countries build on multiple identities consisting of fluid components inherited from different professional phases, contested and reproduced over time. The degree of (dis)continuities is influenced by the nature and stage of political transformation. Explanations are also found within structural working conditions, as persisting power structures (political ownership, clientelism) and new economic pressures in capitalist markets (financial insecurities, low salaries) limit possibilities of investigative, independent journalism and professional development. These constraints pose a threat to the perceived credibility of journalism as an institutional pillar of democracy.