

“Journalists at Risk: part of the job?” Unwarranted interference, fear and self-censorship among journalists in COE member states.

Preamble:

“Journalism informs society about itself and makes public which would otherwise be private.” Harcup (2009: 3)

Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms secures the right to freedom of expression and information which is fundamental to any democratic society. Journalists enable public debate, act as social watchdogs, inform on matters of public interest and consequently hold those high in the power structures to account (Committee of Experts on protection of journalism and safety of journalists, 2015, p.1).

The working life of professional journalists is often perceived as dangerous since journalists expose themselves to a number of risk factors for unwarranted interference and consequently may have high levels of fear (Chappell and Di Martino, 2006: 71). Their working conditions and the issues they are compelled to deal with, lead to a number of risk factors for this group. These job characteristics may expose them to direct physical confrontations, attacks and psychological abuse. The Committee of Experts on protection of journalism and safety of journalists (2015) remarks that the increased harassment, unlawful scrutiny, intimidation and deprivation of liberty experienced by journalists around the globe is disturbing. The Committee also notes that journalists are often physically attacked and even tortured and murdered. This is compounded by a culture of impunity. Threats can also be generated by a range of legal, political, socio-cultural and economic pressures, which can be exacerbated in times of economic crisis and financial austerity. Fear (and experience) of prosecution by arbitrary use of different types of legislation, including defamation, anti-terrorism, national security, public order, hate speech, blasphemy and memory laws can also be risk factors for the exercise of journalistic activities. (Committee of Experts on protection of journalism and safety of journalists, 2015). This phenomenon is commonly called “judicial intimidation” or “judicial harassment”.

Rationale:

Despite the purported high risk of unwarranted interference, the prevalence of such interference and fear and the consequent possibility of self-censorship among journalists is virtually unknown since there are few systematic studies on this phenomenon conducted amongst this occupational group. The discussion about journalists’ victimization experiences is largely limited to fatal incidents that occur in conflict and war zones around the world (Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 2013) and to highly visible incidents such as the attack on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. While evidence exists (as documented in reports by the media, NGO’s and human rights defenders) of attacks against journalists, no representative study on prevalence of unwarranted interference, fear and the consequences thereof exists that could provide a clear evidence base for the scope of the problem and that could allow for the international community to safeguard more effectively their safety and secure freedom of expression and democracy. This study proposes to develop this evidence

base in order to contribute to securing a favourable environment for freedom of expression for everyone (Committee of Experts on protection of journalism and safety of journalists, 2015, p.2).

Definition of key terms to be utilized in the study:

A number of key terms will be utilized in this study and variances in descriptions of these terms highlight the difficulty surrounding the subjective nature of the notions involved. However operationalizing key terms is necessary for a meaningful research agenda. Thus while it is recognised that the following terms are highly contested and very loaded and that multiple definitions exists, for the purposes of this research the key terms to be utilized in this study will be defined as follows.

- **Unwarranted interference** – the facing of acts and/or threats to a journalist’s physical and moral integrity in the exercise of journalistic activities.
- **Fear** - the emotional response to possible unwarranted interference
- **Self censorship** - the act of censoring one's own work or what one says without overt pressure from any specific party or institution of authority, often for fear of sanctions.
- **Journalist** – A person who is regularly engaged in collecting or disseminating information to the public with a journalistic (public interest) purpose

A journalist is someone regularly engaged in gathering, processing, and disseminating (activities) news and information (output) to serve the public interest (social role). The person’s role is to serve the public interest (e.g., reporting on issues central to society’s well-being in matters of politics, economics, health, safety, public order, morality). As an output, news and information reflect not only journalistic activities (e.g., investigation and research, processing in the form of analysis) but also the ethical principles (e.g., accuracy, independence, fairness) that govern those activities. Finally, the person must engage in the journalistic activities on a regular basis (the exact meaning of regularity is open for debate).

Research agenda:

The proposed study would have the following main objectives:

1. to statistically measure the prevalence of unwarranted interference emanating from economic, political and judicial intimidation in a representative sample of active journalists in COE member states. Unwarranted interference will be taken to include attacks on the physical integrity of journalists, the harassment of journalists, the experience of impunity, threats to journalistic sources as well as all measures and acts having a chilling effect on media freedom.
2. to quantitatively document the extent and prevalence of fear, feelings of alarm or dread caused by a number of contingencies including the expectation of unwarranted interference, prevalent among active journalists in COE member states.

3. to investigate the relationship between experiences of unwarranted interference, levels of fear and self censorship among journalists in COE member states.
4. to qualitatively document their experiences of unwarranted interference, fear and possible self-censorship.
5. To theorise what the possible impact of unwarranted interference and fear is on self censorship and freedom of expression.

The research will also explore how unwarranted interference and fear is influenced by a number of both occupational contingencies e.g. length of journalistic career, specific media platform (e.g. print or digital media), type of contract (if any), employment conditions, professional affiliations and /or a number of structural variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and country where journalistic work is being carried out.

Research design:

The study will adopt a mixed method approach.

The first three research objectives will be researched quantitatively utilizing an anonymous self-report questionnaire survey administered to a representative sample of active journalists. The sample will consist of a non-probability sample (convenience sample) of journalists who are associated to the journalist associations that are partners of the platform of the COE (Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists), as well as journalists who are in some way associated with other key entities in the field of safety of journalists. This strategy allows for the inclusion in the sample of journalists who are not formally affiliated to a union or association resulting a much more representative sample. The sample will be recruited via a recruitment letter to be sent to all journalists on the databases of the entities highlighted above. The recruitment letter will provide a link to the online survey.

The fourth and fifth research questions lend themselves to qualitative exploration through the use of semi structured narrative interviews with a select number of journalists that will allow a documentation and in-depth understanding of the experience of unwarranted interference and fear and to theorise how this impacts self censorship using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1992).

The study will be conducted in three phases documented in more detail below

Phase 1: Pre study

The prestudy will focus on:

- Securing the relevance of the research agenda through further development and refinement of the research proposal
- Developing and finalizing the research tool for phase 2 of the study. While the research tool development will mainly be the responsibility of the key

researcher, a working group will be created to contribute to its construction, validation, piloting and finalization. The working group will consist of a number of experts in the field who will hold a one-day meeting to finalise the questionnaire. The quantitative tool will be administered online through survey monkey.

- Recruiting a working group to contribute to the research tool
- Holding a meeting of the working group
- Securing ethical clearance for phase 2 of the study from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee
- Ensuring collaboration on project from journalists' and freedom of expression organisations

Phase 2: Quantitative study on Unwarranted interference, fear and self-censorship among journalists in COE member states

Phase 2 of the study will include the following actions:

- Translating of the research tool into French and Russian
- Preparing research tool in survey monkey
- Piloting the research tool
- Disseminating the research tool

Sampling Strategy:

- The sample will consist of a **non-probability sample (convenience sample)** of journalists who are associated to the journalist associations that are partners of the platform as well as journalists who are in some way associated with other key entities in the field of safety of journalists.¹
 - This strategy allows for the inclusion in the sample of journalists who are not formally affiliated to a union or association resulting a much more representative sample.
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- Translating data into SPSS. Quantitative analysis will be done through SPSS
 - Analyzing data
 - Preparing report
 - Discussion of report with working group
 - Prepare and oversee the text for isbn publication

¹ These will be identified by the working group. An important resource is the publication by Horsley (2013) which provides an overview of the main press freedom/safety of journalists monitoring organisations in Europe:

[http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/belgrade2013/MCM\(2013\)011_en_Horsely_SafetyofJournalists.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/belgrade2013/MCM(2013)011_en_Horsely_SafetyofJournalists.pdf)

Phase 3: Qualitative study on the experience Unwarranted interference, fear and self-censorship among journalists in COE member states

The questionnaire distributed in phase 2 of the study will include 1 item requesting respondents to indicate if they would be available for an in-depth interview on the subject in caption. It is anticipated that there will be enough interest generated to secure at least 20 interviews from a number of countries.

This qualitative phase of the study will include the following actions:

- Develop interview guide
- Recruit sample
- Conduct interviews
- Analyse data: The qualitative analytic strategy will be the Constant Comparative Method from grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).
- Write report
- Finalise report for publication
- Prepare the text for isbn publication

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study ethical clearance should be sought from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee

Time Frame

Phase 1: August to December 2015

Phase 2: January to November 2016

Phase 3: January to December 2017