JOURNALISTS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: BACKGROUNDS AND PROFESSIONALISM

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Comparing journalists across national boundaries and cultures is a game of guesswork at best. There are so many characteristics, attitudes and behaviours that could be said to depend on the specific situation that some would argue against any attempt to look for more general patterns and trends. Yet there are also similarities that seem to cut across the boundaries of geography, culture, language, society, religion, race and ethnicity. Not all journalistic (or human) experience is unique to a particular time and place.

Keeping in mind that many of the comparisons here are rough and post hoc, rather than carefully preplanned and controlled, this article attempts to look for similarities and differences in the basic characteristics and professional values of journalists from 21 countries and territories represented in a forthcoming book, The Global Journalist, edited by me (Weaver 1997 in press). These include Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, Chile, China, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Poland, Spain, Taiwan, and the United States. The surveys were conducted between 1988 and 1996, mostly by mail and telephone, and include interviews with more than 20,000 journalists total.

This task is made easier by the fact that many of the studies borrowed questions from our original questionnaire (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986; 1996), which was modelled on a 1971 study of U.S. journalists done by sociologists at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman 1976). But some of the surveys employ their own questions and measures, or modify

the original wordings somewhat. And there is, of course, always the slippage in meaning involved in translating from one language to another.

The point of trying to draw comparisons of journalists in these different areas of the world is the hope of identifying some similarities and differences that may give us a more accurate picture of where journalists come from and whether they are becoming more professional as we prepare to leave the 20th century behind and begin a new century and millennium. The major assumption is that journalists' backgrounds and ideas have some relationship to what is reported (and how it is covered) in the various news media around the world, in spite of various constraints, and that this news coverage matters in terms of world public opinion and policies.

Backgrounds and Demographic Profiles

In our latest study of U.S. journalists, conducted during the summer of 1992, we concluded that the statistical "profile" of the typical U.S. journalist in 1992 was much like that of 1982-83: a White Protestant male with a four-year bachelor's degree, married and in his thirties (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 1). But there were some changes from the early 1980s — an increase of four years in median age to 36, more minorities, and more journalists earning college degrees, but no increase in those majoring in journalism in college (about 40 per cent).

This demographic profile of U.S. journalists is similar in some ways to the profiles of journalists in other areas of the world, but there are some notable differences as well.

Gender. For example, men were more typical than women in newsrooms in all 19 countries or territories reporting gender proportions, although in some countries women were almost as numerous as men (New Zealand and Finland), whereas in others women lagged far behind (Korea, Algeria, Britain, and Spain). The average proportion of women journalists across these 19 countries and territories was one third (33 per cent), almost exactly the proportion in the United States (34 per cent).

Age. Another similarity between the U.S. and the rest of the world as represented here is that journalism is a young person's occupation, with most journalists between 25 and 44 years old. The average age of journalists ranges from 30 to 40 in the dozen places reporting it, with the youngest journalists coming from Hong Kong and Algeria, where the average age is 30, and the oldest living in Canada and Finland, where it is 40.

In most places, journalists are younger on average (35 years old) than is the work force in general. In Hong Kong, as in other places, many young people become journalists to earn some experience before deserting for more lucrative and stable jobs in other fields, especially public relations. This seems to be a fairly common pattern around the world.

Education. Although most journalists in the U.S. hold a four-year college degree, this is not the case in a number of countries. The countries with the lowest proportions of college graduate journalists are Australia, Finland and Mexico — all well below one half. Those with the highest are Korea, Spain, and the United States, with Chile and Ecuador nearly as high. Eleven of 18 countries or territories report more than one half of their journalists holding a four-year college degree, so it is more common than not for journalists to be college graduates in this group, but the variation is substantial.

It is not typical for journalists to be graduates of journalism programs in college, however. Only three countries reported more than half of their journalists had concentrated on journalism in college — Spain, Brazil, and Chile. In the other 11 countries or territories reporting this proportion, most did not exceed 40 per cent, with the lowest figure from Britain (4 per cent) and more typical figures hovering in the 30s.

Thus, whatever journalistic benefits or evils are attributed to journalism education must be tempered by the fact that most journalists are not graduates of college-level journalism programs in this sample of countries and territories. In fact, the average percentage among the 14 reporting was 41.5. Without including the extremes of Spain, Brazil, Chile, and Britain, it was one-third, a bit under the U.S. percentage of 39.

Race and Ethnicity. Less than half of the countries and territories represented in the book reported a figure for racial and ethnic minority journalists. The reported figures are small at best, ranging from one to eleven per cent, and reinforcing the conclusion of the 1971 U.S. study by Johnstone et al. (1976, 26) that journalists come predominantly from the established and dominant cultural groups in society. This seems to hold true especially in Taiwan, Britain, and Canada, and somewhat less so in Brazil, China and the United States.

Thus, in terms of demographics, the journalists from the various countries and territories were similar in average age and proportion of minorities, but varied considerably in gender, level of education and whether they majored in journalism.

Professional Values

In ***Journalists for the 21st Century***, based on surveys of about 1,800 first-year journalism students in 22 different countries in 1987-1988, Slavko Splichal and Colin Sparks (1994) argue that even though there is no strict definition of journalism yet, the occupation seems to be moving from craft to profession (although not yet a true profession) because of changes in the education and specialist knowledge of journalists, and an emphasis on autonomy and professional ethics.

The conclusion that journalists are not yet a true profession is similar to that by Cleveland Wilhoit and myself. We wrote at the end of our first American journalist book that "American journalists are unlikely ever to assume a formal professional status" because of their scepticism of institutional forms of professionalism such as certification or licensing, membership in organisations, and readership of professional publications (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 167).

Looking across 22 countries, Splichal and Sparks noted in Chapter 5 that their initial hypothesis was that similarities across countries should prevail if journalism is really becoming a profession. They concluded in their last chapter that their major finding was a striking similarity in the desire of journalism students' for the independence and autonomy of journalism. In addition, they didn't find evidence that journalism education and professional socialisation were necessarily a function of politics or dominant ideology.

Based on these findings, they argued that some universal ethical and occupational standards were emerging in journalism, but this conclusion seems to contradict the differences in ethical reporting standards found in surveys of journalists in Britain, Germany, and the U.S., and it may reflect the lack of specific questions about journalism roles, reporting practices or ethical dilemmas in the Splichal-Sparks questionnaire more than the emergence of universal ethical and occupational standards in journalism.

There may be a fairly universal desire for more freedom among journalists in various parts of the world, although our findings on the importance of this job aspect are mixed, but that does not necessarily signal the emergence of any universal standards in journalism, nor is it necessarily anything new. A look at more specific professional roles or values, as well as reporting practices, may help to more precisely define the areas of agreement and disagreement among the 20,000 journalists of the world represented in ***The Global Journalist*** book (Weaver 1997 in press).

Roles. In our latest study of U.S. journalists (conducted in the summer of 1992), we found, for the most part, that their perceptions of the roles of the news media were broadly similar to those a decade ago (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 133-141). A majority of U.S. journalists tended to see two responsibilities as extremely important: getting information to the public quickly and investigating government claims.

Among the 12 countries or territories reporting on the role of getting information to the public quickly, there was also considerable agreement. In most cases, two-thirds or more agreed that it was very important, except in Taiwan (58 per cent) and Canada (60 per cent), but even in these places a clear majority agreed.

On investigating government claims (or being a watchdog on government) there was considerably less agreement, however, with journalists most likely to consider this very important coming from the more democratic countries of Australia, Britain, and Finland. Those least likely to see this watchdog role as very important came from Taiwan, Algeria and Chile, where there has not been a long history of democratic forms of government. But there were exceptions to this pattern. In Germany, which has been a democracy since World War II, there was not any more support for the watchdog role than among Algerian journalists. And in China, which has never had a democratic system of government, there was more support among journalists for investigating government than in France and Canada.

The analytical function of news media — providing analysis of complex problems — remained about the same in the U.S. during the 1980s, with about half saying it was extremely important (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 136). But among the 14 countries or territories where this role was measured, there were considerable differences, with journalists in Taiwan and France least likely to consider it very important (40 per cent), and those in Finland (96 per cent) and Britain (83 per cent) most likely to say so.

Another role where there was some disagreement was the extent to which journalists should give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs. A little less than half of the U.S. sample said this was an extremely important role, with journalists working on daily and weekly newspapers especially likely to say so.

Although only six countries reported the importance of this role, there was some agreement among five — Hong Kong, Britain, Finland, Germany, and the United States — but Chinese journalists were notably less likely to see this role as very important. Compared to other journalistic roles, this one was not seen as important by large proportions of journalists in any location. Only in Britain and Finland did slightly more than half of the journalists consider this a very important role.

There was great disagreement on the importance of providing entertainment among the 14 countries or territories reporting this role. Those journalists least likely to consider this very important were from Canada (7 per cent) and France (8 per cent), whereas those most likely were from Germany (77 per cent-West, 87 per cent-East) and Chile (50 per cent). Clearly, this is one role where national differences in journal-

istic values are in sharp evidence. It seems that journalists from the Far East and North America were least likely to regard entertainment as an important function of journalism, but in Europe there were huge differences by country.

There was also disagreement on the importance of reporting accurately or objectively, with those journalists least likely to say so from Britain (30 per cent) and the Pacific Islands (37 per cent), and those most likely from Germany (89 and 84 per cent), Finland (77 per cent) and Taiwan (76 per cent).

Thus, there was considerable agreement among journalists regarding the importance of reporting the news quickly, and some agreement on the importance of providing access for the public to express opinions, but considerable disagreement on the importance of providing analysis and being a watchdog on government. There was most disagreement on the importance of providing entertainment, and considerable variance in opinions on the importance of accurate or objective reporting.

Clearly, there was more disagreement than agreement over the relative importance of these journalistic roles considered together, hardly evidence to support the universal occupational standards mentioned by Splichal and Sparks (1994). The reasons for the disagreement are difficult to specify for so many possible comparisons, but a secondary analysis of the data from journalists in China, Taiwan, and the United States by Zhu et al. (1996) suggests that political system similarities and differences are far more important than cultural similarities and differences, organisational constraints or individual characteristics in predicting the variance in perceptions of three roles (timely information, interpretation, and entertainment) by journalists in these societies.

Organisations. Another possible indicator of professionalism (or lack of it) is membership in organisations that encourage professional standards and values. Only seven studies reported data on this, but among those there was a wide range — from 18 per cent claiming to belong to a journalistic organisation in Hong Kong to 86 per cent in Australia and 83 per cent in Hungary, followed fairly closely by Taiwan, Britain, and Spain, with the U.S. in between at 36 per cent.

Most of these differences are likely explained by the requirement in some countries that journalists belong to a union to be able to work, but the large differences here also call into question whether journalists are becoming more professional around the world.

Ethics of Reporting. Still another measure of how professional journalists are is which reporting methods they consider acceptable.

Our surveys of U.S. journalists included questions about the acceptability of questionable reporting practices that were first asked in a 1980 study of British and West German journalists (Donsbach 1983; Koecher 1986) and also in public opinion surveys in the U.S. during the 1980s (Weaver and Daniels 1992; Weaver and Wilhoit 1986; 1996).

For example, a majority of U.S. journalists in 1992 said that getting employed to gain inside information may be justified on occasion. But a national survey of 1,002 adults done for the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1985 found that only 32 per cent approved of journalists not identifying themselves as reporters (Gaziano and McGrath 1986), as did 32 per cent in a 1981 Gallup national survey and 38 per cent in a 1989 Indiana state-wide survey (Weaver and Daniels 1992). The questions were somewhat different, but it is likely there was a considerable gap between

the U.S. press and public on the acceptability of undercover reporting.

Another gap with the public appeared when U.S. journalists' opinions about the use of hidden microphones or cameras were compared with the public's. Only 42 per cent of the 1985 national sample of the public (and 46 per cent of the 1989 Indiana sample) approved of using hidden cameras in 1985, compared with 63 per cent of journalists in 1992 who said this practice might be justified. Again, the questions were not identical, but a gap seemed likely.

One practice that was approved by fewer U.S. journalists than the U.S. public was paying for information. Only 20 per cent of the journalists in our 1992 study said this might be justified (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 157), compared with 30 per cent of the 1985 national sample and 33 per cent of the 1989 Indiana sample who approved. On this score, then, U.S. journalists seemed less permissive (or more ethical) than the public at large.

If journalists are becoming more professional in a universal sense around the world, we should expect their views on the acceptability of various reporting practices to also become more similar. In our earlier 1982 study of U.S. journalists, we found considerable differences between U.S., British, and German journalists on whether certain practices might be justified. The German journalists were much less likely to approve of badgering or harassing sources, using personal documents without permission and getting employed to gain inside information than were the U.S. and British journalists. The British journalists were especially likely to say that most of the questionable reporting practices could be justified, with the U.S. journalists in between the British and the Germans on most practices (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 139).

What about more recent times? Are journalists' views about which reporting methods are acceptable becoming more similar over time? In the U.S., we found some large increases from 1982 to 1992 in the percentage of journalists who thought that it might be justifiable to use confidential business or government documents without permission (up from 55 to 82 per cent) and using personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission (up from 28 to 48 per cent who thought this may be justified). But the percentages approving the other methods stayed about the same (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996, 157).

When journalists from different areas of the world are compared, there are considerable differences, some very large, on the proportions saying that some reporting methods might be justified, as well as some agreement on other practices.

For example, on revealing confidential news sources, which has been the practice of most agreement (as unacceptable) among U.S. journalists from 1982 to 1992, journalists from 13 of the 14 countries or territories measuring this were very reluctant to say it might be justifiable (10 per cent or less said so in Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, the Pacific Islands, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, the United States, Brazil, Chile and Mexico), but 39 per cent of the journalists in Finland said it might be acceptable. On this practice, then, there was a high level of agreement among all journalists except those from Finland, suggesting a near-universal professional norm of protecting confidential sources.

On other reporting methods, however, there were some very large differences of opinion. With regard to paying for secret information, the range is from 9 per cent who think this is justifiable in Canada to 65 per cent in Britain and 62 per cent in Finland who think it may be justifiable. On undercover reporting (claiming to be someone else), the range is from 7 per cent in Canada to 63 per cent in Brazil and 58 per cent

in Chile who might find this practice justifiable. For badgering or harassing news sources the percentages vary from 12 in Germany to 84 in Hong Kong and 82 in France, and for using personal documents without permission from 11 in Germany to 49 in Britain and 48 in the U.S.

As for using business or government documents without permission, the range of those who might approve runs from 26 per cent in Taiwan to 86 per cent in Britain, 83 per cent in Brazil and 82 per cent in the U.S. And, finally, getting employed to gain inside information was seen as possibly justifiable by as few as 22 per cent of journalists in Chile and as many as 80 per cent in Britain.

Given these very large differences in the percentages of journalists who think that different reporting methods may be acceptable, it seems that there are strong national differences that override any universal professional norms or values of journalism around the world, except in the case of revealing confidential sources, where there is strong agreement except in Finland that this should never be done.

Aspects of Job. Another possible indicator of professionalism of journalists is which dimensions of their jobs they consider most important. Some would argue that salary, job security, and chance to advance are less professional aspects of an occupation than editorial policies, ability to develop a speciality, autonomy, and helping people (McLeod and Hawley 1964; Windahl and Rosengren 1978; and Beam 1990).

There are wide disagreements among journalists from different countries on which aspects of the job are very important. Journalists in France and the former West Germany were more likely to emphasise freedom on the job than pay, job security, and chance to advance, but this was not the case in Brazil where journalists were more likely to say that pay was very important, followed by freedom and the chance to help people. Journalists in Algeria were likely to think that almost all job aspects were equally important.

Looking at the "non-professional" job aspects, it's clear that Brazilian journalists were most likely to rate pay very important (91 per cent), perhaps because of the very large rates of inflation in that country, followed by former East German journalists at 73 per cent. Surprisingly, journalists in Chile (2 per cent) and Mexico (7 per cent) were least likely to say so. Whatever the reasons for these differences, there is not much agreement across countries on the importance of pay.

For job security, journalists in the U.S. were most likely to consider it very important (61 per cent), no doubt because of the much more competitive job market and the lack of growth in journalism jobs during the 1980s, followed by those in East Germany (60 per cent). Those least likely to say so were from Canada (18 per cent) and France (21 per cent), most likely reflecting the economic situations in their countries and illustrating a considerable range of disagreement across countries.

As for the chance to advance or to be promoted, those most likely to rate it very important were from Brazil (62 per cent) and Australia (51 per cent), again likely reflecting the economies of their countries. Those least concerned about advancement were from Finland (1 per cent) and Mexico (4 per cent).

On balance, then, it looks as if the Brazilian journalists were most likely to emphasise the "non-professional" material aspects of the job of journalist, and those from Mexico were among those least likely to rate these aspects very important. There are striking differences in the proportions of journalists from the different countries considering these aspects of their work as very important, suggesting little support for any universal motives of journalists.

Turning to the more "professional" job aspects, journalists from the U.S. (69 per cent) and the Pacific Islands (61 per cent) were most likely to rate editorial policy as very important, whereas those least likely to do so were from Canada (16 per cent) and France (24 per cent).

As for developing a speciality, journalists in East Germany (56 per cent) and Brazil (55 per cent) were most likely to rate it very important, whereas those from France (23 per cent) and Canada (30 per cent) were least likely.

Even on perceived freedom on the job, a journalistic norm that Splichal and Sparks (1994) identified as strikingly similar among the journalism students from 22 different countries, there were notable differences among the journalists interviewed in the studies reported here. Those from East Germany (85 per cent), Brazil (74 per cent), and France (74 per cent) were most likely to say that freedom on the job is very important, whereas those in Canada (36 per cent) were least likely (although this was the aspect of their jobs rated most highly as compared to others). There does seem to be more agreement on the importance of this aspect of the job than on others, as Splichal and Sparks (1994) argue, but there is still considerable variance between countries.

And, finally, on the journalistic norm of helping people, those journalists most likely to consider this very important were from Brazil (70 per cent) and Chile (64 per cent). Those least likely were from Canada (16 per cent), again suggesting a wide range of opinion on this indicator of professionalism.

Images of Audience. A final possible indicator of professionalism of journalists is their view of their audiences. Although only six countries included this measure in their studies, there were some striking similarities and differences.

About one-fourth of journalists from Algeria, Brazil, and the U.S. strongly agree that their audiences are interested in breaking news. But only one-third of the journalists in the U.S. strongly agree that their audiences are interested in politics and social problems, compared with nearly three-fourths of the East German and Mexican journalists. Nearly one-half of the East German journalists strongly agree that their audience is gullible, or easily fooled, and the U.S. journalists are the least likely to say so (only 3 per cent strongly agree).

Again, on these measures of professionalism, there are some striking differences on two of the three, raising the question of whether journalists are becoming more professional around the world, as Splichal and Sparks (1994) argue.

Conclusions

Whether one thinks that journalists are becoming more professional around the world depends on the definition of professional and the indicators used. But a variety of possible measures of professionalism reviewed here suggest that there are still many differences among journalists from the 21 countries and territories represented in The Global Journalist book (Weaver 1997 in press). Even though these are not a representative sample of all countries, they do include some of the largest and most influential, and they are located in most of the major continents and regions.

Further analysis is needed to uncover some of the reasons behind the differences reported here. Many of them seem to reflect societal influences, especially political system differences, more than the influences of media organisations, journalism education, and professional norms. The patterns of similarities and differences are not neatly classifiable along some of the more common political or cultural dimensions,

however, lending some support to the conclusion of Splichal and Sparks (1994) that journalism education and professional socialisation are not necessarily a function of politics or dominant ideology. Additional comparative studies of journalists, perhaps using in-depth case studies, might uncover other influences on journalists' views concerning their professional roles and ethics, and document these views in more detail.

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