

The Invisible Threat for the Future of Journalism: Self-Censorship and Conflicting Interests in an Increasingly Competitive Media Environment

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Abstract

Self-censoring practices seem to be a serious threat for the future of journalism. Journalists around world are forced self-censoring by power players. Governments are the major players to force journalists to censor their news stories. In history, governments always wanted to control the media and made laws and regulations to put journalists under control. Journalists who dare not to obey the rules are severly punished. Using advertising as a weapon privately owned companies also put pressure on journalists. Publishers who need advertisement revenues for surviving have to accept whatever politicians and business owners told them to do. So publishers force the journalists working for them to follow the rules. In some countries gangs put pressure on jurnalists to prevent them to write about their illegal activities. They threat journalists with death. Although it changes from country to country, these are the main reasons which force journalists self-censoring. As a result of this, journalists choose not to write against the interests of any power players. They hide the facts they have already discovered, they cut any information which they think will bother the power players and even they do not want to make any search on any sensitive issue which they cannot write the truths about. This is called self-censoring. Journalists, who are supposed to inform the public about the events happening around the region they live, are unable to do their task for fear of losing jobs even their lives. Consequently, self-censoring practices of journalists put the future of journalism into danger. Preventing self-censoring is not an easy task but educating journalists and providing them a safe environment to conduct their search and publish their news stories may be helpful.

Key words: self-censoring, censor, journalists, media, publisher

1. Introduction

The self-censoring practices may be threatening the future of journalism. This invisible threat seems to lower the credibility of journalism and journalists. Self-censoring is an extensively studied issue by the scholars (Tapsell, 2012; Muřiková, Chaaban, Salomon, & Lee, 2013; Cook & Heilmann, 2013). Journalists who censor their own works as if cutting the trees which they planted with their own hands, they put the future of their profession in jeopardy.

Self-censoring practices, which are mainly the result of the pressure that state authorities, economic and social pressure groups and illegal organizations, have imposed on media companies and journalists (Riva- Palacio, 2006; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006; Lee & Chan, 2008). These pressure groups do not leave a way out to journalists. In other words, journalists, either have to censor the information and the facts they have gathered which will harm the interests of these groups or to bear the consequences which mean death or get fired. The owners of media companies are also threatened as the journalists, more of it, their companies are not allowed to get ads from government or private sectors. As a result of this, media owner put more pressure on the journalists and editors to cut any information which will bother any of the pressure groups.

For this reason journalists have no other choice but to choose self-censoring (Tay, 2013, September 17). After practicing self-censoring for years, journalists and editors become like automatic self-censor machines.

Consequently, journalists, who are supposed to inform public about the events happening around and make investigations on problematic issues and write news stories for their readers in detail, become well-behaved kids to follow the orders of pressure groups and censor whatever information they are directed to cut out and don't want to research on any sensitive issue which they cannot write the truths about (Ingram, 2004; Tapsell, 2012).

Self-censorship, as it was mentioned above, may be said to lead to a significant loss of credibility not only for the media companies but the journalists as well and worst of it the future of journalism is being jeopardized. No need to tell it, the biggest loser of this game becomes the societies which are deprived from the right to get information about the events happening around.

The purpose of this study is to examine the self-censorship practices, which are as old as the history of journalism, and the possible damage they cause for the future of the journalists and the profession of journalism and how the public is being effected from these practices. Then the possible preventive measures to be taken will be discussed. The sample to be examined will be limited to the self-censoring practices in Pakistan, Turkey and Ukraine.

The study proceeds as follow: In the first section a background information on censorship, definition and history, state, private sector and media relations is given. Then the methods used in this study is explained in the second section. Findings, discussion and the results take place in the third section.

1.1 Self-censorship in media: Definition and historical process

Censorship has a long history. It has appeared in different ways in different cultures. In some cases, writers were beheaded, imprisoned, tortured and books burned in other instances. From the very beginning of writing, the established power players have always found ways to impose bans, restrictions on writers. Church is indicated as the major player of censorship game.

When William Tyndale, a humanist, printed an English translation of the New Testament, he aroused the furies. Captured, he was imprisoned, tried for heresy, and garroted. Then his corpse was tied to a stake and burned. Sir John Oldcastle, who has been identified as Shakespeare's model for Falstaff, was first hanged and then burned, both Church and State again getting their due (Fang, 1997, p. 27).

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines self-censorship as a kind of control of what someone say or do in order to avoid annoying or offending others, but without being told officially (n.d.).

While defining self-censorship Lee & Chan say that it is an act which is done to prevent annoyance and punishment of powerful players such as government, major advertisers, or corporations owning the news organizations and there is no outside power to tell them to censor their work (2008, p. 207). Wilke defines `Censorship` as a tool which is used to manipulate communication. He says:

...it became significantly more important in the early modern period with the invention of printing, which enabled the easy reproduction of texts in large quantities. Initially, it was the church which imposed censorship, though institutions of the state soon became involved as well. In the 17th century, the campaign against censorship and for freedom of the press began in England, where substantial success was achieved as early as 1695. In France and Germany, on the other hand, freedom of the press was not achieved until (considerably) later (Wilke, 2013, May 08, p.1).

According to the findings of a survey, conducted by Pew Research Center and the Columbia Journalism Review, self-censoring is commonplace in the news media today. "About one quarter of the local and national journalists say that they have purposely avoided newsworthy stories, while nearly as many acknowledge they have softened the tone of stories to benefit the interest of their news organizations" (Self-censorship: How open and why, 2000)

Censorship and self-censoring are two different terms in respect of meaning. In censorship, boundaries are drawn about what to write or not by the outside powers, such as governments and companies, so journalists or publisher have no choice but write or publish as they are directed. On the contrary, in self-censoring issue, journalists are not told to do things openly but they censor themselves, hide some facts that they think would be dangerous to write. A recent study by Mužíková, Chaaban, Salomon, & Lee explains this definition in detail:

In general, there are two forms of censorship in the media: the first is enforced by the state, political, religious or private party while the second stems from the very same party that is publishing the idea or media message. The latter form is known as self-censorship and is practiced in order to avoid trouble or sanctions from state officials, striking controversy, offending an audience, initiating lawsuits or other problematic consequences (2013).

In most cases, journalists see self-censor practices as their defence shield as it is defined in an article published by Tay, "Self-censorship, in other words, is no different from locking up your front door, or even defending yourself from a robber. It is meant as a defense and is generally practiced by many journalists all over the world" (Tay, 2013, September 17).

Official or private, all power players have always used censorship as a pressure tool to defend their interests, to increase their profit and their influence on the public for years. Sharing this idea, Ingram says, "In some countries insidious but often successful threats to media freedom come from self-censorship, whereby journalists pull their punches in writing and reporting because they have come to learn and operate within the boundaries government has drawn" (2004, p. 567).

The reasons that lead the journalists to censor their own works have been widely studied by many scholars recently (Riva- Palacio, 2006; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huges, 2006; Lee & Chan, 2008; Skjerdal, 2010, December 18; Tapsell, 2012; Mužíková, Chaaban, Salomon, & Lee, 2013; Wilke, 2013, May 08).

A major study conducted in 2010, reaches a conclusion that commercial pressure and cultural expectations, gender, racial and religious issues are also important factors which cause self-censorship as well as political reasons. In the same study advertisers in Europe and US markets are indicated as potential threats to independent journalism (Skjerdal, 2010, December 18, pp.103-104).

Power players use different kinds of methods to force journalists to obey them. Tapsell explains how the government and private firms to exercise power to force journalists to self-censor by giving the example of Indonesia:

Indonesian Journalists saw it as a concept enforced by political and business elites in order to reduce criticism of their rule. "Despite their misgivings about the practice of self-censorship, current-day Indonesian journalists are under considerable pressure to exercise it. In this sense, journalists themselves feel that their autonomy is hindered because of external pressures placed on their professional practice" (2012, p. 299).

In his study (2012) Tapsell reports that, "self-censorship appears, when journalists limit or ignore aspects of a story because they fear repercussions from those with vested interests who are cited in their report" (p. 229). As in the case of Mexico, reported by Riva- Palacio (2006) if any journalists dare to report what he saw or what he found out about a gang then he would risk his life:

Jose Luis Ortega Mata was a brave publisher of *Semanario*, a weekly news magazine in the Mexico-U.S. border town of Ojinaga, Chihuahua. He denounced drug trafficking in that northern region of Mexico and the relationship between drug lords with local police, politicians and businessmen. Early in 2001, he was about to publish a new report on how drug money was being used to finance political campaigns when a gunman shot him twice in the head, killing him on his way to his office (p. 31).

Women journalists are also part of the game. They are easily intimidated by political and economic powers. To force them to censor their stories is much more easier. Ironically, the pressure groups are not always outside powers, their male colleagues also intimidate them.

Women journalists face numerous problems in their push for professional rights and to report on gender issues....Some of the media institutions violate rights of women journalists such as presenting them as sexual objects; sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse, undervaluing or ignoring their work, successes, efforts, rights and by symbolically destroying or frustrating them.... Thus women are underrepresented in political, social and economic reporting; this results in limiting the freedom of expression caused by self-censorship by a male dominated industry (Enhancing Gender Equality in the Media in Eastern Africa, 2008, p. 10)

As in the case of Ukraine, some countries make laws that grant freedom or guarantees kind of freedom for press but somehow nothing changes:

The Ukrainian government has taken few steps in 2013 to meet its commitments and obligations under OSCE in the area of freedom of expression. Overall, the situation in the area is unsatisfactory with only some isolated legislative changes that can be considered as progress in the last two years. It appears unlikely that there will be significant improvements in the situation in the near future because, while legislation in some cases improves, practice does not follow (Golovenko, R. (2013, December, p. 2).

1.2 Self-censorship in media: Different countries, different practices

Self-censorship practices vary from country to country. As a concept, self-censoring is universal, that is, meaning is the same but practices differ according to the cultural elements. A touchy issue for a country may not be considered so sensitive to be censored in another country. A sensitive political issue that cannot be mentioned in media in a country, may not be a problem to be discussed in the media openly in another country.

In authoritarian regimes and semi-democratic countries such as North Korea, Ethiopia, Yemen, journalists tend to self-censor to avoid punishment. From time to time, even in democratic countries, as in the US example, some government practices caused journalists to engage in self-censorship, as it is reported in a PEN American Center study:

Since Edward Snowden leaked documents detailing National Security Agency surveillance in June 2013, writers are not only overwhelmingly worried about government surveillance, but are engaging in self-censorship as a result: 28% have curtailed or avoided social media activities, and another 12% have seriously considered doing so. 24% have deliberately avoided certain topics in phone or e-mail (Chilling effects: NSA surveillance drives U.S. writers to self-censor, 2013, November 12)

Governments who want to control the media put pressure on them but in most cases censoring causes more harm than good for the governments.

Research on the effects of censorship, a particular form of constraint on choice, suggests that censorship can have the consequence of greater interest in the communication being censored. Thus, government policies that attempt to limit its citizen's access to information may backfire and even prompt a backlash if such policies are made public (Hayes, Scheufele, & Huges, 2006, p. 433).

1.2.1 Ukraine: No security for journalists

According to Freedom House report (2013) there is not enough security for journalists. Economic and political pressures continue to dominate the media:

Since the owners of nationwide TV channels have special relations with the ruling party they do not publish news about the opposition parties or groups. The quality of the news reports are low because they have a lot of paid content in them. Ukrainian media tends to be increasingly tabloid in nature, ignoring or avoiding news stories of social, economic, or political import. According to monitoring of journalistic standards by Telekritika, among TV stations in June 2013, an average of more than 100 topics, facts, and key background details were ignored by TV channels in their reporting (p.7).

Another report (2013) published by IREX argued that since journalists in Ukraine are not professionals and have no or little experience in journalism is controlled and used easily by the political forces. In the report, it is said that journalist can write supportive stories about only the top political figures: President, Prime Minister and head of tax services. The report which is mainly based on the opinions of their survey participants assert that "continuous pressure on the the editors, direct censorship and self-censorship of journalists" practices are lowering the standard journalism (The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia, 2013, p. 228-229).

1.2.2 Pakistan: A dangerous country for journalists

After 2002, when President Musharraf introduced new liberal laws, media enjoyed more freedom than ever before. "New liberal media laws broke the state's monopoly on electronic media. TV broadcasting and FM radio licenses were issued to private media outlets" (Media in Pakistan, 2009, July, p. 16).

Since her independence from India, Pakistan has always had problems with the former mainland, the new neighbour, India. As a result, issues relating India, and the disputed land Kashmir have always been sensitive issues for the rulers of Pakistan. For this reason, all rulers, civil or military, used this touchy issues as an excuse to censor media for years. After the military coup of General Ayub Khan another sensitive issue added to the list: No criticism of the regime which "became a constant feature of all the military regimes that followed" (Mezzera, M., Sial, S. (2010, p. 31, 32).

According to a report (2009, July), there are three large media companies in Pakistan. Since, they own majority of print publications and electronic media such as radio stations and TV channels they have the power to effect the politicians and the society (Media in Pakistan, p. 14).

Since the independence from India, governments of Pakistan always wanted to control the media. They used different methods to censor the works of journalists: Such as founding Press Advisory Board and government owned media outlets and news agencies and discriminatory use of advertisements (Mezzera, M., Sial, S. (2010, p. 31, 32).

Another problem caused to self-censor is the insecure environment:

- Killings, physical attacks and coercion are constant concerns for many Pakistani journalists, editors, cameramen, other media workers and owners.
- Violence and threats are serious problems that lead to self-censorship and limit the topics and geographical areas being covered by the media (Media in Pakistan, 2009, July, p. 25).

The political affiliations and mutual interest relationships of media owners can be considered the significant factors in forcing journalist to self-censor their stories. Finally it can be said that lack of professional education and experience of journalists may be one of the most important reason which leads them to self-censor.

1.2.3 Turkey: Self-censoring is a problem

As it was mentioned above, self-censorship varies according to the cultural elements of a society and national priorities. That's why, self-censorship practices differ from country to country.

Since the foundation of republic, Turkey had two military coups and a kind of military intervention every ten year or so. The country is still administrated by a constitution made by the last military coup leaders in 1982. As participant journalist-1 indicated: "It is the source of all kinds anti-democratic regulations on press freedom. Although succeeding civil governments have made some important changes to ease restrictions but it is necessary to make a new civil constitution for further freedom for press".

Turkey had 61 governments since the foundation of republic in 1923. During this long period, nearly all governments have tried to control media through legislations, regulations in one way or another. Private companies used advertising and mutual relationships with media owners or editors as the hidden weapons to censor media. The pressure coming from military regimes were the worst ones. Journalists who felt pressure coming from different sources for years developed a tradition of self-censoring as their colleagues in many countries in the world. Evidently, Turkey is not the only country that has self-censoring problem. In her review of self-censoring practices, Professor Cooper, Columbia Journalism School, says, (Cited by Akbaşlı ve Yardımcı, 2013, November 03) "...journalists censor themselves on sensitive issues when feels forced by government or any of other outside powers. This is a difficult situation... This is not only for Turkey, applies to the world". Studying on the same issue, Akcura said: "to trust to journalism or not is a highly debated issue in new media era and self-censoring practices are more wide spreaded than censor in Turkey" (2013, June 10). Sharing the same opinion, participant journalists 1, 3 and 5 state that political pressures from political parties or organizations, societies, threats from private companies and pressures of media owners and editors are the main reasons that force journalists to think twice before writing any news story criticising any pressure group even if they have proofs.

Participant Journalist -1, while evaluating media and government relations, said:

Like in many other countries, from time to time journalists claimed that there is no freedom of press Turkey. It is the same scenory played by different players in different times. When there is a right wing government in power, leftist journalists play their role and when there is a left wing government rightist journalists do the same. Plus whoever has link with foreign media then they enter the scene and write whatever information they receive, without making further investigations, from their journalist friends in Turkey. As I said above this is like a game. I believe the same game is played in some countries of the world.

According participant journalist -3, as long as the ownership structure of media of today remains it is not possible to stop self-censoring. He said that while he was a working for a media company in the past, no journalist working there could write any news story about former President Kenan Evren, even though he completed his term as President years ago, because he was a close friend of the owner. He also remembered that the owner didn't allow them to write any news stories that criticise the United States just because he had good relationships with the US Ambassador.

Both participant Journalists -2 and 5, who had similar interpretation, say that self- censorship practices can be seen in some cases, such as political leanings, economic interests of journalists and direct pressure either from the publisher or editorial staff or outside powers who threaten them in different ways.

Participant journalist -7 argues that the main reason that leads the journalists to censor their own news story is their lack of professional education and experience. “There are some journalists around who even don’t know to write a simple news story. There are certain rules in journalism. Such as not to write anything against laws and against the values of societies. If something is not against any law or is not unethical then there is no need to censor it. Journalists who don’t know these general rules don’t know what to write and or not. That’s why, media owners should employ educated and experienced journalists in the news rooms and in the field. Those who didn’t study journalism at universities should be employed in the sections other than news departments or should be trained on journalism before being employed in news related departments.

Participant journalist-6 comes up with a different idea: “Journalists should be journalists only. You cannot be a journalist and a politician at the same time. Unfortunately, some of our colleagues practice this game. If you want to play the two roles together than you cannot find anybody to view your performance. For this reason, journalists should be impartial, that is, free from any kind of political party leaning, while searching for documents and information and then writing his or her news story. Otherwise his or her news story will be not a real news story but just a political manifesto. In my opinion this is also kind of self-censorship practice of journalists caused by their own political leanings. The future of journalism will always be in danger as long as partisan journalists are there.”

Participant journalist-4 says, “Self –censorship practiced in Turkey. It is a truth. In my opinion the main reason that forces journalists to self-censoring is not the government pressure but the legal system. The conflict between government and prosecutors since December 17, 2013 incidents is an evidence of it. For this reason, our legal system has to be reformed in order to prevent pressures on journalists.”

The Method

In this study, I used descriptive literature review, open-ended interviews and fieldwork methods. During the research process I interviewed 7 Turkish journalists, who had at least 10 years of experience or above, working in national newspapers, news agencies and TV channels, by e-mailing them interview forms. I told them I will not disclose their names so that they could answer my questions more comfortably and give me more detailed information. I asked them only three questions thinking that their time is limited and cannot spare more time for me. The first question was about media and government relationships, the second one was the self-censorship practices and reasons and the last question was about the probable impact of self-censorship for the future of journalism.

I carefully reviewed all available related articles and the reports published by Freedom House, Pen American Center, Columbia Journalism Review, International Media Support, Foreign & Commonwealth Office. And I gathered my notes, that I have written during my 19 years of professional work as a correspondent of a Turkish daily newspaper at the UN Headquarters in the New York City. The sample is limited with self-censorship practices in Turkey, Pakistan and Ukraine.

3. Findings

- Self-censorship is a common problem among journalists and widely practiced in many countries in the world.
- The main reasons that force journalists to censor their news stories are political, economic pressures and life threats.
- Self-censorship practices of journalists put in danger of the future of journalism.
- Preventing self-censoring practices seems to be difficult. Educating journalists on the ethical rules of journalism, laws and government regulations and values of the society may be useful.

3.1 Discussion

Self-censorship practices of journalists have been studied by many scholars in the last decade (Lee & Chan, 2008; Tapsell, 2012; Mužíková, Chaaban, Salomon, & Lee, 2013; Cook & Heilmann, 2013).

Lee & Chan (2008) define self-censorship as an act that is practiced to prevent the annoyance and punishment of powerful players such as government, major advertisers, or corporations owning the news organizations and there is no outside power to tell them to censor their work (p. 207). Tay, defines it as a defence tool for journalists (2013, September 17).

When considering the statements of participating journalists and literature review we can infer that self-censorship practices in media can be seen all over the world, as Cooper said, "...journalists censor themselves on sensitive issues when feels forced by government or any of other outside powers. This is a difficult situation... This is not only for Turkey, applies to the world" (Cited by Akbaşı ve Yardımcı, 2013, November 03). The results of the survey conducted by Pew Research Center and the Columbia Journalism Review support Cooper (Self-censorship: How open and why, 2000). Agreeing with Cooper, Tay (2013, September 17) says that self-censoring is generally practiced by many journalists all over the world.

There are some reasons which force journalists to censor their own work. The most important ones are political and economic pressure and life threats. According to Skjerdal (2010), cultural expectations, gender, racial and religious issues are also important factors which cause self-censorship as well as political reasons (pp.103-104). Participant journalist-4 argues that the legal system is to be blamed for self-censoring practices as in the case of Turkey. A report published in 2009 indicates that "Violence and threats are serious problems that lead to self-censorship" (Media in Pakistan, p. 25). In an earlier report published by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism points out that life threats to journalists in Mexico were serious indeed: "if any journalists dare to report what he saw or what he found out about drug lords then he would risk his life" (Riva-Palacio, 2006). Participant journalist -6 asserts that political leanings of journalists was also a significant reason that lead them to self-censoring. Participant journalist-7 pays attention to another point. He argues that lack of journalism education and experience is also an important factor that causes self-censoring. In his opinion, a journalist who don't know the laws and rules of journalism and its limits may censor his work for fear that he may be violating the laws or rules.

Participant journalist -6 comes up with a different idea: "Journalists should be journalists only. You cannot be a journalist and a politician at the same time. If you want to play the two roles together then you cannot find anybody to view your performance. For this reason, journalists should be impartial, that is, free from any kind of political party leaning, while searching for documents and information and then writing his or her news story. Otherwise his or her news story will be not a real news story but just a political manifesto. In my opinion, this is also a kind of self-censor practice of journalists caused by their own political leanings. Self-censorship practices of journalists put in danger the future of journalism. The future of journalism will always be in danger as long as partisan journalists are there."

Skjerdal (2010, December 18) points out pressure of advertisers on media owners as potential threats to independent journalism (2010, December 18, pp.103-104).

Preventing self-censoring practices seems to be difficult. Since self-censorship practices are products of journalists' own personal value judgments, it is not very easy to stop them to censor their own works but it is not impossible. Participant journalist -7 says journalists who do not have a journalistic background should be trained by media companies. Training journalists on journalism ethics, rules and values of society may be helpful to stop self-censoring practices. According to participant journalist - 4, reforming legal systems of the countries may help preventing self-censor practices of journalists. In his opinion, if journalists are given assurances to be protected by law against the power players then they may stop self-censoring.

3.2 Results

Both the studies conducted by scholars in the last decade and the statements of participating journalists put forward enough evidence that many journalists around the world practice self-censoring. Political, economic, cultural and social pressures and life threatening actions are forcing journalists to self-censor. For fear of losing their jobs even losing their lives, journalists choose not to write everything they have found out and hide the facts they have discovered as a result of their search. This act, which is called self-censoring, put the future of journalism into danger. As the scholarly studies and statements of participating journalists indicated, stopping self-censoring is not an easy task but educating journalists and providing them a safe environment to conduct their search and publish their news stories may be helpful on preventing self-censoring. Since the sample is limited with Pakistan, Turkey and Ukraine this study cannot give the big picture on self-censoring practices of the world.

Scholars who want to make research in the same field may study on finding out ways to protect journalists from the pressure groups.

Demographics of participant journalists

Participant journalist 1: He is 35 years old. He worked as a journalist at national daily newspaper in Istanbul for 11 years.

Participant journalist 2: He is 47 years old. He has worked as correspondent at three national daily newspapers in Turkey. Now he is New York correspondent of a Turkish national daily newspaper.

Participant journalist 3: He is 30 years old. He has been working at a national news agency in Ankara as a reporter for 7 years.

Participant journalist 4: He is Ankara representative of a national daily. He is 50 years old and has worked as a reporter at two different newspapers before becoming a representative of this newspaper.

Participant journalist 5: He is 37 years old. He is a TV news reporter at a local TV channel in Konya.

Participant journalist 6: She is 35 years old and presents a documentary program at a national TV channel in Ankara.

Participant journalist 7: He is 56 years old. He is the foreign news editor of national daily in İstanbul. He covered national and international conferences for 20 years before coming to this position.

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