On media accountability and religious tradition: a Weberian lecture of a contemporaneous comparative study

Raluca Nicoleta RADU, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

The research results of a pan-European project (the author was part of[1]), that included also two Arab countries, indicate that the approach journalists manifest toward issues of ethics, responsibility and accountability depend on their national backgrounds. Both the quantitative and the qualitative methods used by the MediaAct team, in the 14 countries under study, pointed in the same direction. These differences may be explained by national histories, political or economic factors, which lead researchers in the past to propose different clusters of nations, as it was the case of several seminal texts, such as Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's Four Theories of the Press (1956) or Hallin and Mancini's Comparing media systems (2004). Nevertheless, the results of the MediaAct study show that different clusters, based on journalists' approaches to responsibility and accountability, may be constructed. Why, in some nations, regardless of the historical backgrounds, the press council is more powerful than in others? How can one explain the similar attitudes towards responsibility, both for the Italian and the Romanian journalists, taking into account that the Italian media system is the most bureaucratic in Europe?

The article proposes the introduction of another factor in the discussion about responsibility, following Max Weber's line: the religious tradition. The discussion of research results will be based on the sociology of work and religion and on previous results of other cross-national analyses of religion and work attitudes. The need to be accountable and responsible, the approach to guilt, the acceptance of regulatory and normative institutional pressures and the possibility of negotiation with different pressure factors may be better explain by general religious context, traditional understanding of work and leisure and traditional understanding of guilt and absolution. These all are rooted in a national religious context, even if the country is a laic one.

Résumé

Les résultats de la recherche d'un projet pan-européen, MediaAct (dont l'auteur a été part), qui comprenait aussi deux pays arabes, indiquent que l'approche des journalistes pour les questions d'éthique dépende de leurs origines nationales. Les différences peuvent s'expliquer à l'aide des histoires nationales, des facteurs politiques ou économiques, ce qui a conduit les chercheurs, dans le passé, à proposer des différents catégories des pays, comme fut le cas de plusieurs textes fondamentaux, tels que Four Theories of the Press, de Siebert, Peterson et Schramm (1956) ou Comparing media systems, de Hallin et Mancini (2004). Néanmoins, les résultats de l'étude MediaAct montrent la possible existence de catégories différentes, basées sur les approches des journalistes à la responsabilité et à la responsabilisation. Pourquoi, dans certains pays, quels que soient les contextes historiques, le Conseil de la presse est plus puissant que dans les autres? Comment peut-on expliquer les attitudes similaires vers la responsabilisation des journalistes italiens et des journalistes roumains, en tenant compte du fait que le système médiatique italien est le plus bureaucratique en Europe?

L'article propose l'introduction d'un autre facteur dans la discussion sur la responsabilité, dans la ligne de Max Weber: la tradition religieuse. La discussion des résultats de la recherche sera basée sur la sociologie du travail et de la religion et sur des résultats antérieurs d'autres analyses transnationales de religion et des attitudes de travail. L'approche a la culpabilité, l'acceptation des pressions institutionnelles réglementaires et normatives et la possibilité de négociation avec différents facteurs de

pression peut être mieux expliquer par le contexte religieux générale, par la compréhension traditionnelle du travail et des loisirs et de la compréhension traditionnelle de culpabilité et d'absolution. Tous ces éléments sont enracinés dans un contexte religieux national, même si le pays est un pays laïc.

Mots-clés

Responsabilisation, journalisme, tradition religieuse, Protestantisme, Catholicisme, Orthodoxie, Islam.

Professional autonomy and accountability

Accountability and responsibility in journalism are closely linked to the creation of the journalistic world, as an autonomous field from politics, literature or the arts, in the 19th century (Schudson, 1978; Ferenczi, 1996; Radu, 2011). During the processes of identifying journalistic values, such as truth telling and neutrality, and journalistic norms, related to news gathering and writing, the members of the newly created professional world were also designing the main lines for defining and controlling their own professional field. As it was the case with other professions, like the ones of medical doctors or lawyers, the control of the professional field encompasses the ideas that professional conduct is regulated by peers (Coman, 2007) or that professional status gives a person the legitimacy to perform actions forbidden for outsiders (Scott, 2004). These privileges are counterbalanced by a societal requirement that media becomes more responsible to public needs (Betrand, 2000, Eberwein et al., 2011, McQuail, 2000): that journalism is performed to the benefit of the citizen and of the consumer and that a media company should explain deviation from the most legitimate model of journalism - of the public interest defender, should disclose hidden interests (of owners or journalists) that interfere with professional conduct or should accept and correct mistakes. Journalists are requested to fulfill a mission, as understood or defined by members of the public. Professional autonomy means, in the last decades (see Evetts, 2006) being responsible towards own professional standards and being accountable in front of the public, of pressure groups, of academics, of politicians, and of different other media stakeholders.

An international team, under the Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe project – MediaAct, financed through the FP7 program of the European Union, applied a survey about accountability and responsibility in twelve countries of the European Union and two Arab countries. The research design was based on the description of the media cultures proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), by grouping Austria, Germany, Finland, The Netherlands, and Switzerland under the Northern European or Democratic Corporatist Model, France, Italy and Spain under the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralism Model, keeping United Kingdom as a representative for the Liberal Model and using two other categories, the Eastern-European Model, for Estonia, Poland and Romania, and an Arab Model, for Jordan and Tunisia. The representative sample, of 1 762 journalists, was calculated starting from the size of the journalistic population in each of these countries. Thus, the smallest samples, of 100 journalists, were targeted in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Jordan, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, and Tunisia. Bigger samples were gathered in Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom and Germany. The survey was made during the second half of 2011 and during the first trimester of 2012, mainly through a specialized website (for more information on the methodology, see Eberwein et alii, 2013).

A questionnaire was designed in order to map the attitudes of journalists towards traditional and innovative media accountability instruments (MAI). Traditional instruments ranged from professional codes of ethics and press councils to journalistic education, following the classification of Bertrand (2000), and innovative MAI referred to instruments that use the Internet and the social media. The team also used questions related to ethical issues, such as political or economic pressures on newsrooms, and regulative instruments, such as media laws. As expected, when grouped by national origins, the responses of the journalists differed, and the differences were explained by the MediaAct researchers by the use of narratives related to national histories, political or economic factors (Fengler et alii, 2013).

Media systems' model tested quantitatively

For the purpose of this paper, only two sets of answers will be analyzed, for this multiple answer question: "Which of the following have most impact

on journalists' behavior in your country?" The journalists were asked to grade, from 1 – no impact at all to 5 – very high impact, several MAI, which included professional codes of ethics and press councils. In Figure 1 and Figure 2 the answers were grouped following the Hallin and Mancini extended categories.

have a strong support for the press councils, which differentiate them from the rest. Even if both press council and code of ethics are traditional media accountability instruments that should work in tandem, there is not a strong, visible connection between the attitudes journalists, in different national environments, have towards them. According to
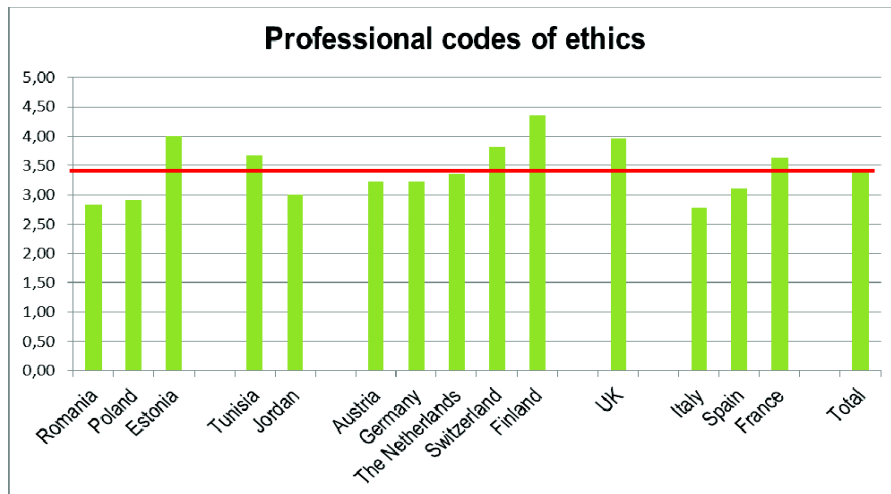

Fig. 1. Answers to the question "Which of the following have most impact on journalists' behavior in your country?", grouped using the Hallin and Mancini extended categories, for Professional codes of ethics. Data source – MediaAct research.
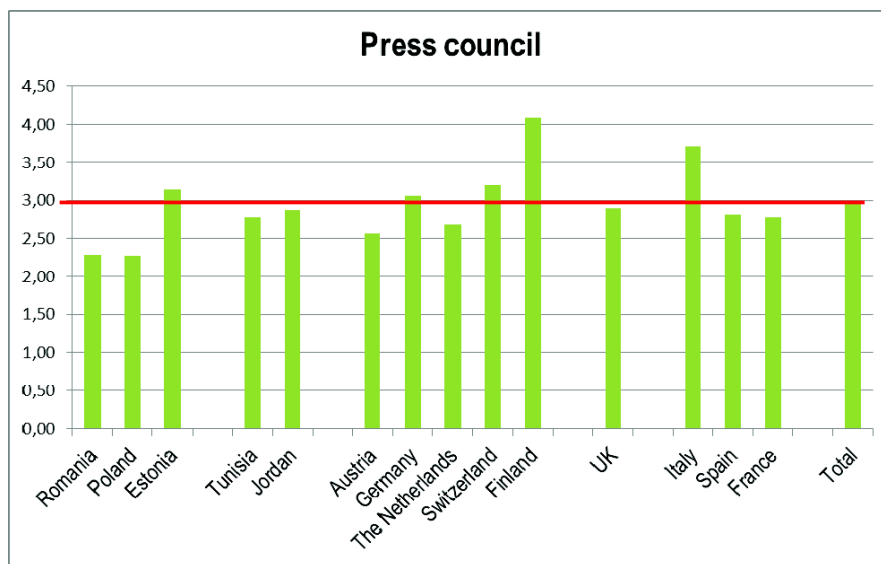

Fig. 2. Answers to the question "Which of the following have most impact on journalists' behavior in your country?", grouped using the Hallin and Mancini extended categories, for Press councils. Data source – MediaAct research.

From the two figures, it is clear that there are important differences within all categories. Finland, Estonia, Tunisia, Switzerland, UK and France have a stronger support for professional codes of ethics, when compared with the rest of the countries, but are scattered in different categories. Finland and Italy

Hallin and Mancini (2004), the democratic-corporatist model is characterized by strong professionalization. In the MediaAct data, a strong professionalization, as expressed by support for press councils and codes of ethics, is sustained only with the attitudes expressed by Finish and Swiss journalists. The rest of the

answers may be explained by different historical backgrounds in the evolution of the media system. This is the case of Italy, for example, that has a strong press council, because the council recognized professional journalists by awarding them press cards – a situation not common in the rest of Europe. The support for the Italian code of ethics is not as strong as for the press council.

Hallin and Mancini's model was challenged and discussed in the last decade and it is not my intention here to validate or invalidate it. Instead, my goal is to use an elaboration model (Babbie, 2010), to see if another factor, apart from geographical location, local history or political system, can be used to explain better the quantitative results. The answer to another question, "To whom do you feel responsible as a journalist?", suggested a possible factor to be considered – religion. When asked if, in their professional lives, journalists feel responsible towards God, only Romanians and Jordanians indicated the divinity as important or very important (see Figure 3).The rest of the journalists acknowledge a very week influence of God on their professional activity. The question was not asked in Tunisia, due to the recent events of the Arab spring.

Religion is understood here as a *broad cultural syndrome of deeply held beliefs related to supernatural agents, and of emotions and behaviors*

religious life are influencing the social behavior at large, and individuals' behaviours, in particular, even if a person doesn't consider herself or himself to be a religious one. The social attitudes and the behaviors in one nation might be influenced, generation after generation, by a dominant religion. This religious influence is visible, my hypothesis goes, even in the professional life and in the attitudes and social behaviors that are related to professional values, norms and to acceptance of responsibility instruments.

McCullough and Carter (2011) offer also a definition of self-regulation useful in this discussion - a *process by which a system uses information about its present state to change towards greater conformity with a desired end state*. There is the need for self-regulation, it follows, if there is a difference between the perceived present state and a desired state. A genuine requirement for functional accountability instruments exists if there is a genuine requirement to change the present state.

Religion and work ethics

The hypothesis that religion influences professional life and the organization of social life is not new. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*
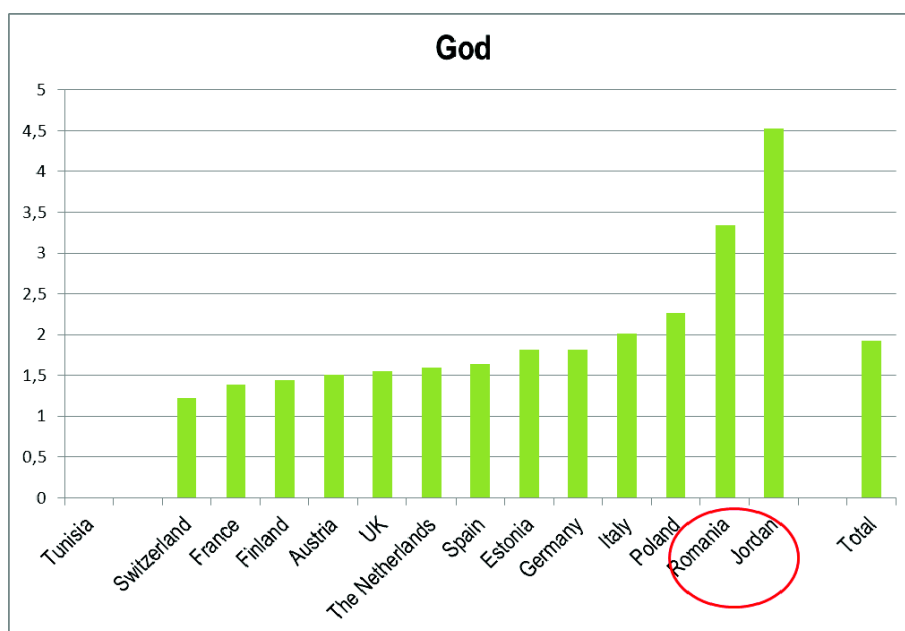

Fig. 3. Answers to the question "To whom do you feel responsible as a journalist?" Source – MediaAct research.

(including ritualized and socially shared practices) that are the result of and support for beliefs (McCullough and Carter, 2011). My basic hypothesis is that rituals and the socially shared practices of

Capitalism (1905/ 1950 for the English version), Max Weber explains his vision of social control through religious ideas, focusing on a comparison between Protestants and Catholics. Capitalism is rooted in the

Protestant calling: "the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs [*is*] the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume" (Weber, 1950, p. 80). This standpoint was different from all Christian visions of work, earnings and absolution before. For Protestants, the chosen ones are able to run businesses and conduct a wealthy, fulfilling life. In other Christian denominations, all people are worthy of absolution, that is granted by God, through Church.

Using the case of Protestant calling, Weber explains that work related attitudes depend on the dominant religion of a country and this is why Protestant countries were able to nurture the capitalist spirit.

Another classical work of religion and social control over social life is the study of Emile Durkheim on suicides (1897). Durkheim noticed that Protestant countries and, within one country, Protestant communities have a higher suicidal rate that Catholic communities. This was also true when comparing Protestant communities with the ones that have a more organized religious life, as the Anglicans have or as the Jewish people have. "The only essential difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is that the second permits free inquiry to a far greater degree than the first", explains Durkheim (2005, p. 112). In the case of "all early religions, [*the religious life*] consists basically of a body of practices minutely governing all the details of life and leaving little free room to individual judgment", he adds (Durkheim, 2005, p. 112). Durkheim proposes the hypothesis of religious communities, as high constrain settings, that impose a model of behavior and sets of norms and values over individuals.

Recent studies on religion and work sustain the hypotheses of Weber and Durkheim, even a century after they were first published. Parboteeah, Paik and Cullen (2009) used the dataset of *World value survey* to test the influence of religion on intrinsic work values (such as personal fulfillment) and extrinsic work values (such as financial gain). They showed that most religions view work positively. Individuals that declared to have no religious affiliation regarded highly intrinsic and extrinsic work values, also. However, they found that Christianity is negatively related to extrinsic work values (financial earnings) and not related to intrinsic work values (fulfilling jobs), in contrast with Islam, Buddism, Hinduism, that have positive relationships with these values. When looking inside the Christian group, the researchers

discovered that "Protestantism had the desired positive relationship with intrinsic work values, while the Orthodox branch had a negative relationship." (Parboteeah, Paik and Cullen, 2009, p. 63). Thus, the hypothesis of Max Weber, of social control of work ethics through religious ideas, that links Protestantism with a positive approach to financial gains obtained through hard work, still holds true more than 100 years later.

A second study relevant in this discussion is that of Charles Y. Glock. The American researcher proposes the comfort hypothesis to explain church involvement, and demonstrates, using statistical data gathered in the United States of American, that religiosity is a status source (Babbie, 2010). The general hypothesis of Durkheim, that religion exerts social control through the organization of religious life, still holds true, at least for the groups of individuals that look for status obtained easier inside a religious congregation than outside of a religious context.

The MediaAct data will be used to verify if the differences among the national groups of journalists can be explained by the existence of a national dominant religion. Figure 4 indicates the religious affiliations of the population in the 14 countries under study, as presented by a site of social data on religions in Europe, eurel.info.

Using the data on the religious affiliation in different countries, we can now talk about two Arab countries, Jordan and Tunisia, about a predominantly Orthodox country, Romania, about a group of Catholic countries, Poland, Italy, Austria, Spain and France, and a Lutheran country, Finland. Switzerland has as strong religious communities both the Catholic one and the Reformed one. Germany has three clear groups, the Catholic group, the Protestant group and the group that declared no affiliation. Important percentages of the population that declared no religious affiliation are in the United Kingdom (that has a strong Anglican community) and in the Netherlands (with a strong Catholic community). Almost three quarters of the Estonian population declared to have no religious affiliation, with the rest divided between the Lutheran and the Orthodox churches.

The Reformed Church, the Calvinist Church and the Lutheran Church are all Protestant denominations. There are differences among these churches, regarding work and absolution. Historically, in Lutheranism, as opposed to Catholic Church or to

	Catholic	Protes-tant	Orthodox	Islam	Lutheran	Calvinist	Re-formed	Anglican	no affiliation	other
Estonia			12,8		13,6				**72**	1,6
The Nether-lands	26,3	11,4		5,2		6			**42,7**	8,4
UK	9,1			3,1				22	**49,9**	15,9
Finland			1,1		**78,2**				19,2	1,5
Germany	**30,2**	**29,2**	1,09	4,03					**29,59**	5,89
Switzer-land	**41,9**			4,3		33,1			11,1	9,6
France	**52,8**	1,4	1,1						42,5	2,2
Spain	**71,7**								25,9	2,4
Austria	**73,7**	4,7	2,2	4,2					14	1,2
Italy	**86,5**								9,2	4,3
Poland	**97**									3
Romania	4,7		**86,7**				3,2			5,4

Fig. 4. Religious affiliation of the general population in the 14 countries under discussion. In bold, the dominant religion, it such a religion exists. Source: http://www.eurel.info, accesses Oct. 1, 2013.

eastern Orthodox Church, work is viewed as a positive activity pleasing God; in Calvinism, work is an absolute duty (Kahl, 2005). Absolution (see Kahl, 2005; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012) may be obtained from the priests, in Orthodox and in Catholic Churches. In Protestant Churches, absolution is a statement of divine forgiveness, for those who are humble and believing, but in Calvinism, sinning is irreversible. Giving to the poor and serving the Church are steps towards salvation, both for the Orthodox and Catholic, as demonstrated by the Crusades, in the Catholic world, of by the sanctification of a Moldavian Prince, Stephan the Great, by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The links between the dominant religion and social life can be traced historically for the European space (Kahl, 2005). In the case of Islam, in many countries, the influence of the Koran and of the traditions related to the life of Muhhamad on law, the state and other institutions is an accepted fact (Eliade, Culianu, 2007). Islam, also, sustains the ideas of predestination and the divine forgiveness (Eliade, Culianu, 2007).

Thus, the religions relevant in my discussion may be classified on a criterion of organization of religious life, ranging from the highly organized (Islam, Eastern Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, and Anglican Church) to low organized (Protestant Churches). A second criterion regards the religious position on work and absolution: in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, work is a burden; absolution is possible, through the help of priests. For Lutheranism and for Islam, work is regarded positively and absolution is a statement of divine forgiveness. In Calvinism, hard work is required and sinners have no escape.

Based on these basic lines, a rearrangement of the national data obtained as answers for the question "Which of the following have most impact on journalists' behavior in your country?" leads to the results depicted in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

The images seem now more coherent. The journalists from Catholic and Eastern Orthodox countries have an average mark for the influence of codes of ethics and press councils below the general average, with the exception of Italy for press council, already discussed above, and of France, for code (slightly above the general mark). Finland is the only

Lutheran country and the survey data single Finnish journalists from the rest of the sample, by a high support for both press council and code of ethics. Germany, with its strong Catholic and Protestant groups, follows the model of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox countries, with a moderate support for codes of ethics and press councils. In Switzerland, it is possible that the Reformed group has an influence of the approach to work and responsibility, and this might be one of the explanations for an above of the average support for traditional MAI.

Tunisia and Jordan, in my model, would have an above the average support both for press councils and for codes of ethics, but the data show a different reality. Other factors, besides religion, such as politic, economic and social evolutions in the Arab countries, that influence also the journalistic worlds, do influence the perceptions professional hold on traditional MAI.

Estonia, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom can not be explained by my model, since important groups that declared no affiliation are present.
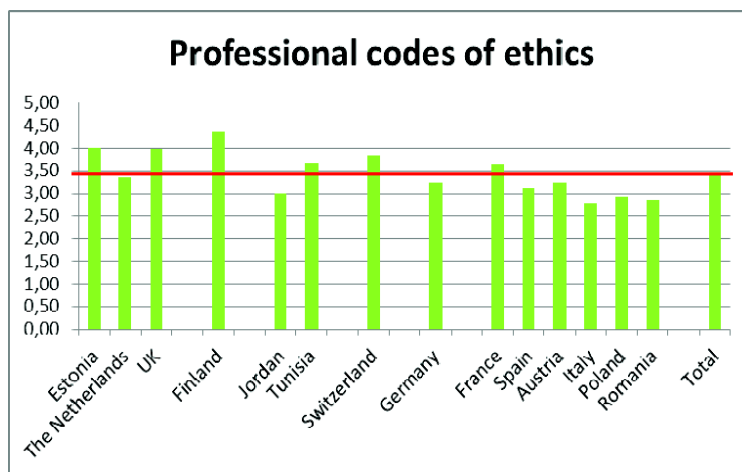

Fig. 5. Answers to the question "Which of the following have most impact on journalists' behavior in your country?", grouped using dominant religion as classifying factor, for Professional codes of ethics. Data source – MediaAct research.
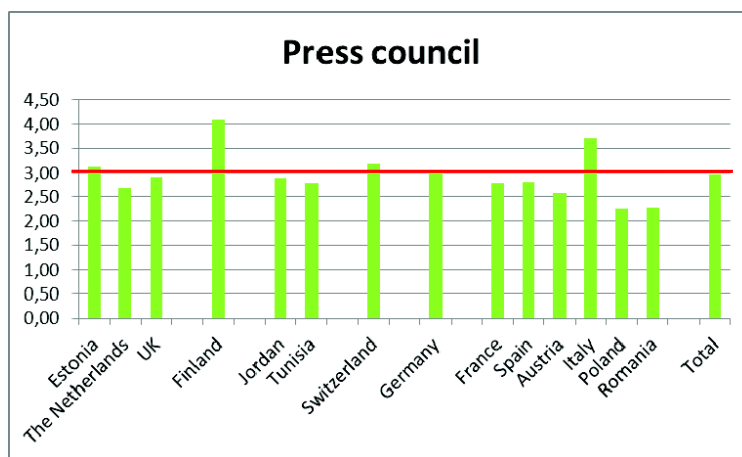

Fig. 6. Answers to the question "Which of the following have most impact on journalists' behavior in your country?", grouped using dominant religion as classifying factor, for Press council. Data source – MediaAct research.

Religion is, nevertheless, only one of the factors that influence professional life.

Conclusions

In an international research effort, under the MediaAct project, that had as goal the mapping of attitudes journalists have towards traditional and innovative media accountability instruments, the quantitative data obtained in 14 countries did not validate the existence of Hallin and Mancini's clusters of media systems. Relevant clusters can not be grouped by the use of information on geographical location, political, social or economic systems alone. A new factor, of dominant national religion, was discussed. My hypothesis was that rituals and the socially shared practices of religious life are influencing the social behavior at large, and individuals, in particular, even if a person doesn't consider herself or himself to be a religious one. This religious influence is visible, my hypothesis goes, even in the professional life and in attitudes and social behaviors related to professional values, norms and to acceptance of responsibility instruments.

A professional group accepts the imperative to self-regulate or to be regulated if the present state of affairs is different from a desired state of professional life. Self-regulation is a process that implies continuous efforts and hard work, so it may be linked to religious approach to work and repentance.

Starting from available data on national religious affiliation, I grouped the countries of the MediaAct research on criteria of organization of religious life and on religious approach to work and absolution. The Orthodox Romania and the Catholic France, Spain, Austria, Italy and Poland have a highly organized dominant church, view work as a burden and absolution accessible with the help of priests. It is possible that negotiation with pressure sources, that demand rule following, is accepted inside the religious congregation, and this approach to rule following reverberates in other layers of society. As a result, traditional bureaucratic media accountability instruments, like code of ethics and press councils, have less support among journalists from Orthodox and Catholic countries, as compared to the average of the sample.

A second influence of religious life over the professional approach of journalists to traditional MAI is traceable in the case of Finland, the only Lutheran country in the sample. A less organized church, as compared with the Catholic one, nurtures a tradition of free enquiry, if we follow the analysis of Durkheim. Work is viewed positively and absolution is a divine gesture, less dependent on the priest. Thus, the approach to hard work and self-regulation might be different than in the first group of countries. The MediaAct data show that this is indeed the case. The support of Finish journalists for self-regulating instruments, such as the press council, and the high acceptance of professional norms and values inscribed in the code of ethics, may be explained by the Finish dominant Lutheran religion.

In the case of the rest of the countries, the religious influence is less evident, either because there is no dominant religious group, or because other factors, such as the political environment or the existence of a less autonomous media field, are influencing journalistic attitudes on traditional MAI.

Is the religious element acknowledged by the journalists? The quantitative MediaAct results indicate that God is an important factor only in Jordanian and Romanian newsroom. The relationship of journalists with God and with the Church is dependent of the contemporaneous image of the Church in the national public sphere and on the perceived role of religious life and of religious leaders. The religious tradition influences the cultural-cognitive context of the journalistic world. Religious tradition influences the need to be accountable and responsible in professional context, the approach to guilt, the perceived possibility of negotiation with different pressure factors and, as result, the acceptance of regulatory and normative institutional pressures. The approach journalists have towards media accountability instruments may be explain, among other factors, by the general religious context, by traditional understanding of work and leisure, by traditional understanding of guilt and absolution. These all are rooted in a national religious context, even if the country is a laic one. Future research, either qualitative or quantitative, may further develop my hypothesis of religious influence over professional attitudes, but with the available data, for several national environments, this hypothesis contains a strong explanatory factor for journalists' acceptance of normative institutional pressures.

Notes

[1] More information on MediaAct, including research teams – www.mediaact.eu. Project funded under the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanties FP7 Programme of the European Commission.

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Raluca Nicoleta RADU, PhD, Assoc. prof., Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania.

E-mail: raluca.radu@fjsc.ro

Address: FJSC, Universitatea din Bucureşti, Bdul Iuliu Maniu 1-3, Corp A, etaj 6, sector 6, cod 061071, Bucureşti, România.

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