

Getting the truth out: The professional practices and roles of Central-Eastern European foreign correspondents covering the war in Ukraine

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Dr. Joy Jenkins is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, School of Journalism and Electronic Media. Her research uses a sociological approach to examine changing organizational identities and practices in newsrooms, with a particular focus on local journalism, magazine journalism, and gender and media. Jenkins is also a research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, U.K. Her work has been published in academic journals including *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Digital Journalism*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. She serves as editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Magazine Media* and on the editorial boards for *Digital Journalism* and the *Journal of Media Ethics*. At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, she teaches courses in news writing, feature writing, global journalism, and media literacy. Before entering academia, Jenkins served as senior editor at *TulsaPeople* magazine in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and copy editor at the *Oklahoma Gazette* in Oklahoma City.

ABSTRACT

Hundreds of foreign correspondents from around the world have poured in to cover the ongoing war in Ukraine since the Russian invasion in late February 2022. Some of them are well equipped and prepared to cover the war for global media outlets. However, those from smaller media organizations often have fewer resources and smaller crews to gather and verify information in the face of false information from Russia propaganda websites. This research explores the work of foreign correspondents on the ground in Ukraine from media outlets in Central and Eastern Europe, where the media environment is still in transition. We will conduct interviews with foreign correspondents from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Hungary, and Serbia, countries that were part of the Soviet bloc and were for decades influenced by Russia. Using an internationally comparative approach, this study investigates not only the working practices of foreign correspondents from small media outlets but also their role in representing and keeping the public well informed about the invasion and the spread of false information about the war in Ukraine.

PROPOSAL

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, seven journalists have been killed and another 11 injured by gunfire, according to the latest report by the Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b). However, the number of attacks on journalists may be even higher, with reporters targeted for even wearing a “Press” armband. Among the attacked journalists are foreign correspondents from local media outlets in Central and Eastern Europe (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b).

More than 1,000 foreign journalists have poured into Ukraine since Russia invaded the country Feb. 24, 2022 (Reporters Without Borders, 2022a). While foreign journalists working for major global media networks have crews of multiple reporters, fixers, field producers, and interpreters in Ukraine, those from smaller media outlets in Eastern and Central Europe rarely have more than two people: a journalist and photographer/video photographer. Some do not have enough financial resources to rent a car or hire a translator, or even buy an armband. These circumstances lead to journalists working constantly to cover the conflict, often without the potential for replacement.

Foreign correspondents are vital to keeping the public informed about the latest developments on the ground in Ukraine. These dispatches are especially important when Russia censors news about the war and spreads false information on social media (McMahon, 2022).¹ Russia has always influenced the media environment in Central-Eastern European countries (Helmus, Bodine-Baron, Radin, Magnuson, 2018), particularly countries that were part of the Soviet Union.

This research will explore the professional practices of foreign correspondents from Central-Eastern European media outlets covering the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We focus on journalists’ criteria for reporting, gathering, and verifying information, as well as how they navigate access to resources and manage their safety. Using an internationally comparative approach, the proposed research will investigate not only the working environment of the foreign correspondents from small media outlets but also their role in keeping the public well-informed about the invasion and the spread of false information about the war in Ukraine.

HOW THE PROJECT WILL EXPAND KNOWLEDGE

At the beginning of the 20th-century, news outlets prioritized the role of foreign correspondents who remained overseas for years to develop their expertise (Hamilton, 2009). The main duty of foreign correspondents was to deliver news about political and economic issues from Africa, Latin America, and Asia to a home audience by relying on local government officials, newspapers, and magazines (Yu & Luter, 1964). Foreign correspondents are carefully chosen, experienced news workers who often represent a glamorous, sometimes heroic elitism in the newsroom hierarchy (Hamilton, 2009, 2011). Today's experienced foreign correspondents help the public grasp the full picture of foreign news stories through prioritizing accurate, fair reporting that also emphasizes human-interest angles and local voices (Zhang & Jenkins, 2021).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early '90s, affected countries transitioned from autocracy to democracy. However, Russia continues to influence the political and media environment in these countries, where the spread of Kremlin propaganda is high. According to Dobek-Ostrowska (2015), four media models exemplify the region today: a politicized model in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania; media in transition in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova; a liberal hybrid model in Poland, Estonia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic; and an authoritarian model in Russia and Belarus.

The role of journalism in democratic transition is heavily debated (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Several studies have analyzed changes in journalists' normative ideals (role *conceptions*) during the democratic transition (Barrera & Zugasti, 2006). However, with a few notable exceptions, there is a lack of systematic analysis about how journalistic ideals materialize in news content (Mellado, 2015) and how these practices change in times of democratic transition.

Most literature on foreign reporting focuses on the role of and need for foreign correspondents, approaches to covering international stories, and gender equity in the field. Fewer studies focus specifically on the role of war correspondents in informing the public about some of the most dangerous places on the planet. Foreign correspondents are vital to informing the public what is happening in conflict zones globally, although they have faced more pressure to engage in live reporting and continually update their reporting for online audiences (Palmer, 2018). The study builds on existing research through exploring how foreign correspondents from Central-Eastern Europe navigate a challenging reporting environment to pursue stories representing multiple perspectives while emphasizing accuracy and challenging disinformation. We will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What professional standards do Central and Eastern European foreign correspondents use to select and report stories from Ukraine?

RQ2: What tools do Central and Eastern European foreign correspondents use to confirm the accuracy of their reporting and communicate with their newsrooms while working on the field in Ukraine?

RQ3: How do Central and Eastern European foreign correspondents view the role of their foreign reporting for their home countries in transitioning democracies?

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

This research uses open-ended interviews with journalists from eight countries in Central-Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Serbia (Dimitrova, 2021). We aim for a final sample of 30-40 journalists. Countries that were part of the Eastern Bloc were socialist states with allegiance to Moscow during the Soviet era. All eight countries are struggling with a lack of freedom of the press (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

This research compares professional cultures of the Central and Eastern European journalists in the field covering the conflict in Ukraine. Questions for the foreign correspondents focus on their experiences on the ground in Ukraine, such as safety; resources (financial, equipment, logistics); and working hours, as well as their journalistic practices, including sources of information, how they gather information and verify it, and their criteria for selecting stories. The use of qualitative interviews is appropriate for this study because it allows the researchers to use “self-reflexivity, context, and thick description” (Tracy, 2019, p. 2) to achieve an in-depth understanding of the object of study.

Potential interviewees will be identified by an online search for on-the-ground reporters who are working for prominent media organizations who are registered with global journalism organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists or the Association of European Journalists. The names will be compiled into a database showing country of origin and media. This sampling method will guarantee the professional stature of the journalists. We aim for a sample of 40 journalists working for public and private media outlets (TV, radio, print, web). The researchers developed the following parameters for participants: reporters, photographers, video photographers, and multimedia journalists from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Czech Republic, and Moldova.

Potential interviewees will be invited to participate, and if they decline the invitation, another potential interviewee will be invited from the same database, matching the same country and media type. This will ensure the diversity of the sample regarding region and media type while decreasing the chance for bias associated with other sampling methods. We will continue conducting interviews until we reach theoretical saturation.

The interviews will be in-person, in-depth, and open-ended, lasting around an hour each and audio recorded. The audio will be transcribed verbatim. The researchers will analyze the transcriptions, identifying common themes using an open coding approach.

STATUS AND TIMELINE FOR COMPLETION

May 2022: Apply for IRB approval; recruit participants; prepare literature review, method

June-July 2022: Complete interviews with foreign correspondents from Eastern and Central Europe

August-September 2022: Transcribe and analyze interview responses

October-November 2022: Develop findings and conclusions

December 2022: Report ready for submission

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The goal of the proposed research is to explore the work of foreign correspondents from media outlets in Central-Eastern Europe covering the war in Ukraine. We aim to contribute to understandings of challenges journalists face while covering war and major international news events. We also hope to illuminate the experiences of reporting abroad with a small budget and staff, as well as how that reflects on the safety of the journalists and how they see their quality of reporting and ability to inform the public. Other potential outcomes will be revealing the tools journalists use on the ground to gather and verify information, develop stories, and communicate with their newsrooms. Finally, we hope to elucidate the role of the foreign correspondent in informing society in a media environment in transition that has been part of the Eastern Bloc, influenced for decades by Russia.

POTENTIAL PUBLICATION VENUES

The research will be submitted to journals such as:

Journalism

Journalism Studies

Journalism Practice

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly

We will also propose a report to be published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, where Dr. Jenkins is a research associate, aimed at informing journalism practitioners around the world.

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PROJECT BUDGET

Budget item: Interview transcriptions

Description: 40 qualitative interviews; \$50 each for professional transcription

Total cost: \$2,000

Budget item: Translations

Description: Some of the interviews will be conducted in the native language of the participants

Total cost: \$300

Budget item: Traveling from the US to Central-Eastern Europe

Description: One of the researchers will travel to Eastern Europe to meet and interview participants in person.

Total cost: \$700

Total: \$3,000