



Interview

Profession in transition: Journalistic professionalism and its changes in Central and Eastern Europe



**Interview with Prof. Dr. Jane Curry, on political transition and media transformation,
successes and defeats in Poland and Central Europe**

You visited Poland for the first time in the 1960s. What media and journalists do you remember from that period?

What I remember most from the 60s was the greyness of print and broadcast media. While I did not read Polish all that well, what I did know was that not only the stories but all the things that draw people to read or watch (pictures and layout as well as interesting stories that had nothing to do with ideology) were rare. What I remember even more than the media itself were all the conversations and explanations about politics that took what was printed or shown and turned it inside out by reading between the lines. No one seemed to look for news, and everyone seemed to look for ulterior motives.

I also remember how very little information there was about the outside. To get that, Westerners went to their embassies' libraries, and when we showed *Time* or *Newsweek* to our friends, they were clear that negative stories had either not happened or were written and published for some other reason.

There are two things I remember most vividly from my stays in 1967 and then on a Fulbright in 1969–70. One was going with my host “mother” to the printing house when she turned her copy on architecture in to the censors through a slot. The other was going to the Konwersatorium at the Journalism School to hear some high level official tell the “truth” and having students turn to me saying “Is that really true?” Even then, it was pretty clear that whatever was said, particularly about the United States, was questioned by students who were training to be the “mouthpieces” of a government they already did not believe in.

You spent a lot of time in Poland and Central Europe. Your book *Poland's Journalists: Professionalism and Politics* published in 1990 by Cambridge University Press was the first attempt to analyze journalists' role in politics in our country.

You predicted the directions and possible developments of the Polish media and journalistic professionalism. Do you think you were right?

Right? I, like virtually every other scholar, knew the system did not work but I never expected it to collapse.

What I did get right was that journalists, wherever they worked, were far from loyal to the old communist system, and the very process of doing journalism work under censorship and political control made them see themselves as professionals who should have autonomy. They saw themselves instead as “the loyal opposition party” and if they had political ties, used them to push the boundaries of the system further. Even men like Jerzy Urban, one of the most respected journalists in the 60s and 70s, who then became the government press spokesman under Martial Law, used their political positions to push the boundaries of what was acceptable, as Urban did in his televised news conferences as press spokesman. He saw to it that the questions and answers that were broadcast went way beyond what was supposed to be allowed.

Then, there was the underground press. In the 70s, it started as essays typed on onion skin paper through layers of carbon paper — hardly easy to get or read. Year by year, it moved more and more to “printed” papers. During the Solidarity period, samizdat was “published” at virtually every workplace. Afterwards, the government went after the underground publishers. But it remained a key part of the Polish “media.” So, I would sometimes be told to read a novel or tract by communists and dissidents alike. When I went to the bookstore to buy it, they blandly told me to go to a distribution point for its underground publisher. That media and its producers became, almost overnight, “legitimate” media and journalists, whether they were Adam Michnik or the women who had published *Solidarność* during Martial Law.

Not surprisingly, then, the media responded virtually instantly to communism’s collapse. The “old” leading journals like *Polityka* continued to do what they had but without going around the censors. Their staff served as leaders for many of the best new journals and papers, including *Gazeta Wyborcza*. It, and a plethora of former government or party papers as well as new papers, shifted to providing real news. The glitch was that commercial competition and the real shortage of funds for most new and old papers, in the first decade or more, left journalists with no time or money to go out and see what was going on and made the owners’ interests paramount. Once the economy stabilized and went on the upswing, though, journalism returned to its old standards of advocacy for the good of society and getting the facts right and presenting them well. How they did this varied dramatically. But, even Urban’s journal, *Nie*, however tasteless, focused on getting the truth out about government and Church missteps.

So, although I never came near predicting Solidarity, Martial Law and the end, what I found from interviewing and surveying journalists was that they were trapped by censorship and political pressure; but, they never saw it as legitimate.

Instead, the best honed their skills in writing and learned the importance of “truth” from not being able to tell it directly. It did not take the invasion of Western journals or trainers to force this.

What has changed most is Polish television. Not only is there now a choice but television has become far less political and far more developed in the quality of its programming. It has become the most international of the media.

What are the main differences between journalism in the communist era and those days in Poland and Central Europe?

Differences: First, the simple things: it's glossier, brighter and more scandalous. There is also so much more choice in every “newsstand.” In the old days, the window of a little kiosk displayed what there was. MPiK had reading rooms that sometimes had international press that was not published by other communist parties to read, never to buy. But the Polish media were pretty cut off.

Without the censors and supervisors from the Press Department, the range of topics increased dramatically. Politics often takes a back seat to shock and human interest. Particularly in the weeklies, though, following politics is hard because opinion and explanations of what are sometimes crazy political stories trump just telling the facts.

The importance of what happened in the past — the old communist days — often trumps present day problems and has led to a lot of inflated scandals.

What are the major problems for the development of journalism professionalization around the world? Do you think that Central and East European journalism faces the same problems as in other parts of the world, including the case of the U.S.?

The main problems for the journalistic profession in both Central Europe and the rest of the developed world come from the rise of the Internet and social media. It means that the journalistic profession is pushed more and more to compete with casual observers and bloggers for whom there is no control. This challenges professionals to match people who report what they see or say what they think as though it is the full and complete story. It also has resulted, particularly in the United States, in a dramatic drop in the number of positions for professional journalists.

Ironically, I think it is less of a problem in Poland and Central Europe because the post-communist media were less established, so they adapted to the Internet more quickly.

There is, though, a flip side to this. The rise of the Internet and social media has increased the pressure on both the press and government to report about what is happening elsewhere — you can't cut it off. It has also shifted the media to explaining and giving background to events it just would have “reported” in

the past. That helped create pressure from the outside on corrupt and repressive regimes.

Do you think there is a global crisis of the journalistic profession?

Yes, I do and I think it is a serious crisis for democratic politics in general and a threat to the remaining authoritarian states. Journalists with knowledge to both “get it right” and analyze events are losing out as people turn away from once a day news to instant reports and explanations that fit their world view.

In the last decade, blogs, Internet news sources that run 24 hours and social media have given people another and often more intriguing way to know what is happening around the world and among people who think about politics as they do. This has both trivialized what we hear about the world and politics and it has helped radicalize politics.

The traditional media of newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news was focused on getting the most readers and viewers. This meant that having the facts right (and first) was most important. Users then had a common base of facts. The new media emphasizes giving news as it happens, whether the facts are right or not. So much comes out that is not right or gets trivialized. Anybody can report anything on Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, or the open sites or even CNN and the *New York Times* for people to report what they are seeing or hearing. Journalists lose out.

This shift also means that there is an incentive to appeal to people’s biases. So, what people hear is often what they want to hear and as it becomes more partisan, the stories become more biased and wilder.

As a result, the press and radio and television that once produced highly respected writers and lead political discussions are now losing out to media, often based on the Internet or other continual reports of the news, that are not based on old journalistic standards of investigation and fair analysis. This, I think, is not only decreasing the role and positions available to professional journalists but is leaving us with partisan politics where people can’t talk to each other because, without a common base of facts, what they think they know and how they see the world are so totally different.

Ironically, the new media are a greater threat to authoritarian leaders than the old media were. They can only control it by shutting down the Internet, their basic lines of communication with the world and for economic transactions. This means that images and words get out and are shown around the world — making repression far away more real and are bounced back in, spreading the word in ways the censored media could not. Groups form in cyberspace, which are far larger than those created by samizdat. They “work” because they bring people together as the old opposition did, but their reach is far wider and more visual so they are far more of a threat to the remaining dictators.

What is the future of journalism in the era of the growing importance of new technologies and non-professional content creators?

The future for journalism is not what I would hope. Fewer and fewer print media can survive the competition. That means there are fewer positions for journalists.

The print media that does still flourish, as well as the broadcast media, are forced to adapt to some of the ways of the new media. They have online versions with constant updates, the broadcast media are forced to try and compete with the new media's "amateurs" who report as it happens, and the "just the facts" journalism of America is turning to the focus on analysis and opinion of European traditions.

What I see as hopeful, though, is that there are consortiums and other new bases to encourage real investigative journalism at all levels. So, although these are hardly "big money makers" for the journalists involved, there are in the new and old media, supports for journalists to investigate in detail what works and what does not in politics, economics and social policy at all levels. Since most of this funding has nothing to do with the old profit motive, there is more room for the old elites to be investigated. Since some is funded from outside, there are international and national supports for those who take the risks.



Prof. Dr. Jane L. Curry is Professor of political science at Santa Clara University in California, USA. She visited Poland for the first time in the 1960s. After that she often returned there. She has published a lot of books, seven monographs and about 40 articles and chapters. She has been the editor or co-editor of more than twelve collective books. Above all, books such as *Central and East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* (Roman and Littlefield, 2007), *Poland's Journalists: Professionalism and Politics*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), and *The Black Book of Polish Censorship* (Random House and Vintage Press, 1984) are very important and fundamental for understanding the process which took place in communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and in the post-communist period.

Thanks to many fellowships, such as a United States Institute of Peace Research Grant, Fulbright Program and others, Prof. Curry has spent a lot of time in Poland and in communist countries. She is an expert and one of the best specialists in Central and Eastern European journalism studies and transformation. She has obtained about fifteen American or international awards and grants, such as a United States Institute of Peace grant (2006–2007 "The People of People's Revolutions: Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine"), Hoover Institution (R.F.E. Archives Project, 2001–2002 — interviews with 42 Polish communist elites and 2006–2007 — "Voices of 'People Power Activists'" — extensive interviews with over 200 participants of the Serbian, Rose and Orange Revolutions on what they did, why, and how); Ford Foundation Award to be General Editor, Romanian and Polish Dissident Archives and

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She was Fulbright Distinguished Chair at the Center for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw from 2003 to 2004. She taught regular courses: “Elections and Political Parties in Post-communist Transitions,” “Cold War,” and “Issues and Problems in Post-communist Transitions” to Polish MA students, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Lane Kirkland Fellows from elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc, and West European exchange students; a special course on post-communist transitions and institutions for Political Activists from the Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kaliningrad, and Uzbekistan; a seminar in a special Winter Program for MA students from the former Bloc; and a seminar on “Problems of Post -Communist Transitions” in the international Summer School of East Europe. She also co-developed and worked on a research team looking at Women Deputies in the Polish Parliament and did the research on the “Uses of Communist Era History in Post- Communist Politics”).

Prof. Dr. Jane L. Curry was interviewed by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska in November 2012.