

# 1 Journalists as professionals in theory and reality

Propaganda, a program of creating opinion, should serve the state as well as political, social and union organizations. But, the journalist should not feel he is a worker for the propaganda apparatus. Naturally, in the process of gathering information, the journalist will represent some point of view but this should be his point of view spoken in his name.

Stefan Bratkowski, Chairman,  
Polish Journalists Association, 1980–81

Who speaks here? One of the “mouthpieces” of communist rule, carefully schooled in the rules and rhetoric of communism so that he could lead the population? Yes, but these are also the words of a professional journalist committed to his rights as a professional to work without interference for his own professional goals of service to the society and to professional leadership. Bratkowski’s words were spoken, after the victory of Solidarity, as Polish journalists moved to reclaim their professional rights. The words are those of both a consummate professional and a committed political actor.

Although Bratkowski was a leader in the profession, he was hardly unique. He, like his colleagues, is a product of explicitly political indoctrination. Yet, his message was a call to try to improve the system not merely to serve the Party. In his case, like that of many of his colleagues, he had strived for some thirty years to make his work his own rather than merely to shape it to fit Party doctrines and censors’ regulations. Like his colleagues, he turned to his professional association not for instruction but liberation, however much it had been concerned primarily with instructing. Like his colleagues, he used his profession to involve himself in policy and politics. And, like his colleagues, he was a product of and actor in Poland’s traumas and revolts beginning in 1948 and culminating, for his generation at least, in the hopes and disappointments of Solidarity and its repression in martial law. His professionalism and that of his fellows defies traditional Western theories. It demands explanation.

---

## 2 Poland's journalists

---

Journalists and journalism in Poland were important actors and elements in the battles of Solidarity. The media they produced was a major concern for both Solidarity and the government. And, while battles went on between Solidarity and the government over issues related to the mass media, journalists fought with both sides to be allowed to produce what they felt, as professionals, was right. Some of their number used professional positions to take active roles in government and others used them to take roles in Solidarity. Still others used the journalists' association to increase professional power and autonomy and to negotiate policy as their profession's representatives. But, whatever their personal or institutional politics, journalists almost universally agreed on what their professional demands and stances should be, just as they had done in earlier years. Most of those stances made it difficult for them to conform to the ruler's wishes.

When martial law was imposed, journalists were the first of the professional groups in Poland to organize to resist it. In addition, their actions during the Solidarity period appeared so threatening and powerful to the rulers that journalists, as a group, were directly attacked in the initial martial law declarations. More than one-third of Poland's journalists in those first days were either fired from their jobs or refused to work in their old positions in the face of the retreat from media freedom. The journalists' professional association then became the first formal professional group since the communist takeover in 1945 to be permanently disbanded and replaced. The group's undeclared "crime," both before and after martial law, appears ultimately to have been its insistence on acting and being treated as professionals rather than as obedient followers of political leaders.

Their apparent defeat under martial law, when the various legal gains they had made previously were essentially rescinded or reduced and their professional elite was forced to leave the profession, makes their professional life no less significant. Past experiences of this group explain how professional groups develop out of a very politically controlled atmosphere, how professionals work around various kinds of political pressures, and what the countervailing forces are against the politicization of all decision-making. The actions of journalists after martial law was declared and the concern of the regime with controlling the profession (especially those who had earlier supported communist regimes) demonstrate the strength of the professional impulse for independence and the viability of professional links in creating this independent world. Finally, pressure was continued for the same professional rights and privileges by the quisling journalists' organiza-

tion established in 1982. This is a further measure of the significance of professional values.

Traditional Western theories of socialization, of interest group behavior, or of change in communist societies do little to explain Polish journalists' behavior in this crisis situation and in earlier periods of crisis in Poland (1956, 1968, and 1970). Nor do they explain their behavior, in the public eye and behind the scenes, under more normal conditions. Such behavior is more usefully explained by Western theories of professionalization and professional group behavior. This theory provides a model for groups (like doctors, lawyers, accountants, social workers, and other self-defined or publicly recognized "professions") who control unique bodies of knowledge not shared by the rest of society. The possession and use of this knowledge is regulated by the groups' internal structures as well as regulations reinforced by the broader society.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, professionals are defined as being part of occupational groups that have gone through a process involving the establishment of professional organizations and schooling, developing full-time work commitments, and pressing for the right to control their own work and membership.<sup>2</sup> In any society these groups, one of which is usually defined as the journalism profession, are able to claim some autonomy and self-control – as journalists in Poland have.<sup>3</sup> They also have a higher level of formal and informal interaction and organization than other social or occupational groups. This they have by virtue of their controlled membership, common interests and values, close connections with each other for large parts of their lives, and their self-claimed special roles in society.<sup>4</sup>

The stress in professionalization theory is on the importance not of formal structures and formally stated positions, actions and demands (the least significant form of professional activity in the West and the one that most depends on the "permission" of the political leadership in the East), but on informal group formation as well as the development of values and action based on the rewards and pressures inherent in professional work anywhere.<sup>5</sup> Even though some of these demands and rewards differ from those of journalists' counterparts in the West, the mechanisms of professional life appear to be comparable.

This approach then gives dimension to the label of "professional" and "professionalized" that so often is used to label any independent contribution by intellectuals in a communist society.<sup>6</sup> It also provides a model for what goes on behind the lines before the political leadership invites professional participation in policy decisions. In fact, this sociological theory helps explain what has been unexplainable in studies of

---

**4 Poland's journalists**

---

communist systems: apparent independent professional action and reaction in the context of politically controlled professional organizations.

### **The place of Marxism–Leninism and the mass media**

The significance of the mass media in any society, but especially in those where mobilization and modernization are primary goals, sets the journalism profession apart from other professions. Journalists play a broader social and political role than other professionals for whom politics has limited political relevance in their work lives. Journalists and their media are charged with being, at least, the “gatekeepers” for all but interpersonal communications in the society.<sup>7</sup> The nature of their professional life weighs directly on this role. As research on the role of the mass media and its messages done in the West, developing societies, and communist states has shown, the professional life and attitudes of journalists are critical influences on the nature of the news presented.<sup>8</sup>

In the European press tradition, where the press initially developed as, and remained, a partisan force that accepts responsibility for the “good of the society,” the role of journalists as professionals is further increased.<sup>9</sup> Polish journalists were not only representatives of various political factions and spokesmen for them throughout Polish history, but they were also representatives of the national interest and national culture during the entire Partition period. Then, the three powers occupying Poland allowed Poles virtually no avenues other than their controlled press to express their nationalism and their political ideas.<sup>10</sup> The Marxist–Leninist tradition grows out of this European tradition. In postwar Poland, Marxism built upon, even as it distorted, the historical responsibilities of the Polish press.

Ironically, the ideological basis for the current “Marxist–Leninist” press is, in fact, a product of the Stalinist period. Neither Marx nor Lenin discussed in detail the organization and role of the press in a post-revolutionary society. Marx merely termed the press “a mirror of the spirit of the nation.”<sup>11</sup> Lenin saw the press as the most effective instrument for fomenting revolution.<sup>12</sup> Only with the advent of Stalinism was this revolutionary image transformed into a structure for the press system of a ruling party. The Stalinist structure has remained the basis for press organization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the ideological touchstone with which journalists and political leaders justify their actions.

Discussion in this section will be limited to the political ideology presented to Polish journalists. It is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of the Marxist–Leninist theory of the press. The Leninist definition of “freedom of the press” on which communist states’ ideology is focused is one in which there is economic control by the “workers” over the means of press production and, thus, workers’ interests have precedence over those of the producers of the press.<sup>13</sup> Communist ideologists stress this use of the press as an instrument both to influence and to reflect working-class opinion. Party domination over the press is, thus, inherently justified by its role as the “vanguard” of the proletariat and by the need to solidify popular opinion to further the revolution.<sup>14</sup>

This Stalinist version of the Marxist–Leninist press was imposed on Poland after World War II. When this was done, the press’ target audience was shifted from the literate, urbanized intelligentsia to the workers. The goal was mobilization not policy debate. But the focus on advocacy and analysis aimed at structuring the population’s thinking to fit historical traditions. This, combined with the respect for the prewar national media which had long upheld national goals while operating under external political controls, helped preserve the legacy of Polish press traditions even in the Stalinist period.

The crucial tract in Polish and Soviet scholars’ discussions of the ideological foundations of the communist press systems is *What Is To Be Done?* (written by Lenin in 1902 as a plan for the revolution in Russia). In it, a heavy burden is placed on the press to serve as the political leadership for the underground.

The organization, which will form around this (all Russian revolutionary paper) will be ready for everything, from upholding the honour, the prestige, and the continuity of the Party in acute revolutionary “depression” to preparing for, appointing the time for, and carrying out the nation-wide, armed uprising.<sup>15</sup>

This activist image of journalism makes the press “not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator but also a collective organizer.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the publication of information for its own sake never entered into these discussions. Professional journalism is, thus, inseparable from political action and the development through the press of ties with workers and peasants and between workers and peasants.<sup>17</sup>

The Stalinist contribution to this ideological basis of journalism was a tipping of the balance in favor of journalists as political propagandists rather than as independent agitators. Journalists’ popular ties were

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36201-6 - Poland's Journalists Professionalism and Politics

Jane Leftwich Curry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Poland's journalists

---

intended to be made and maintained by worker-peasant correspondents. This made the press and the journalists that produced it a part of the "thread from the Party, through the newspaper, which extends to all worker-peasant districts without exception so that the interaction of the Party and state, on the one hand, and the industrial and peasant districts, on the other, is complete."<sup>18</sup>

This reduced both journalists' control over the media and the significance of the press as an independent institution. At the same time, the Soviet-model press is also a monitor of the bureaucracy and its administrative practices. As such, the press is responsible for collecting citizens' complaints, checking their validity, and forcing action on the valid ones.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there is a clear stress on economic and social modernization.

The Soviet press over the years has been one means by which a predominantly illiterate Soviet population was taught to read, and by which it acquired much of the information necessary for daily living in a nation being transformed from an agrarian into an industrialized, urban society.<sup>20</sup>

Journalism is, thus, by definition, a political profession in communist societies like Poland. To be politically involved is not necessarily to be less professional or professionally active. In fact, for journalists, being politically active is often a way to forward one's career and do professional work just as, for many lawyers in the United States, political positions and activities are a career enhancement.<sup>21</sup> And, just as political pressure has often increased journalists' professionalization, the use of political channels and ties has been their way to perform one of their key self-declared professional roles, that of monitor and ombudsman.

In describing their work, Polish journalists in the seventies emphasized that they were experts first and then communists and not an amalgam of the two or simply professionals in the service of the Party. At the same time, they made it clear that, although they earned their salaries from having articles published or programs broadcast, much of what they regarded as professional work involved "behind the scenes" work with political and governmental authorities through a variety of channels and on a variety of levels. For them, then, participation in Party and governmental bodies by making use of their personal ties and connections, serving as experts on commissions, working on professional and policy issues as advisors to citizens' groups as well as government groups, revealing information, speaking at public forums, or being censored and then reprinted in the censors'

reports for top Party officials were all useful channels in professional work. In the Solidarity period, journalists' self-defined professional work also involved journalists participating in intellectual committees to draft press and censorship legislation, schooling young aspirants to the profession, and organizing or acting in bodies discussing policy. And, particularly after the declaration of martial law, for some, professional work was extended to writing in dissident publications or keeping up to date on events and verbally spreading information.

Clearly then, in comparison to most other professions, Polish journalism is a special case. Journalists, more than any other profession in Poland, are expected to participate in political activities as part of their professional work, as defined by their own professional values and the state ideology, simply because the media plays such a critical political role. They also have the least clearly defined professional qualifications and skills so they are the most easily politically regulated and penetrated profession. However, from their own reports and the limited published data that exists, it is clear that, no matter how long and at what level journalists hold political positions, they maintain strong connections with the profession. So, whatever their ostensible tasks or goals, they act first of all as representatives of the journalism profession.

Regardless of the rhetoric about the media being the handmaiden of the Party and "vanguard of the working class," until the introduction of martial law, the presence of professional journalists on Party and state bodies and on citizen groups (including Solidarity), as informal contributors to policy discussions, was of benefit to the political leadership. If they participated in Party or state bodies publicly, journalists tended to lend an aura of credibility to these bodies. They also gave their usually faceless membership a clear, publicly recognizable face. And, as recognizable participants in decisions or as behind the scenes actors, journalists and editors served, throughout the postwar period, as necessary links between individuals and groups who shared their interests and expertise. Journalists were, after all, normally the links between groups and with the population and its problems for other actors in policy-making.

This balance between professionalism and political involvement is not without tension. On the one hand, since journalists are so closely intertwined with the Party and state elite, they are well aware of the conflicts, problems and policy shifts within that elite. Hence, they can and do exploit conflicts, problems or shifts to protect their ability to do their work and to push issues that are of interest to them. They also can



---

 8 **Poland's journalists**


---

make public disputes that the leadership is trying to cover over. On the other hand, although the number of formal positions journalists hold in Party and state bodies and the intensity of personal contacts between top leaders and journalists is determined by non-journalists, these outsiders cannot create or control journalists' desire to be involved or their persistent pressure to be heard. Nor do their demands do anything but exacerbate the conflicting pressure on journalists to be advocates and monitors of the state and the society around them. After all, journalists' reading of their ideologically mandated role, however they see the system, is that they should be "a loyal opposition party in the British sense," monitoring the carrying out of policy and proposing adjustments to it, while protecting their ability to perform professional work correctly.

### **Traditional approaches to groups and policy making: a critique**

Western scholars have observed journalists and other white-collar groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as the key interest articulators of these systems. Even in taking into account the extent to which journalists and other professionals are "political," the growing strength and independence of specialists and professionals as well as the resulting divergence between stated policy and its execution in communist countries have been undeniable. How this all happened has remained a puzzle for which the only key has seemed to be the desire of the political leadership to use professionals' expertise on particular issues.

Groups and the aggregation of group interests in socialist states have virtually no ideological justification in Marxism–Leninism. The evolution toward communism is supposed to result in an evolution away from individuals seeing themselves as part of separate and competing groups.<sup>22</sup> The structures of the Party and state, as well as of social organizations, have been designed to insure that autonomous group interests do not develop and are not articulated. Instead, organizational structures for professional and social organizations are intended to be "transmission belts" for guidance from the political elite to be communicated to organization members and for information on membership activities and concerns to be transferred back to the political leadership. So, they are not intended to articulate or aggregate specific interests, much less develop an insular group identity.<sup>23</sup>

How does professional expertise develop independently enough for



the leadership to hear more than simply approbation of its policy proposals? Why, in times of relative freedom, do professionals suddenly appear to present a coherent and consistent set of professional demands almost without time for prior discussion or germination? How does the professional community, which must serve as a basis for all this, develop, given the strict controls over organizations in these societies? These are all parts of the puzzle of the role of the intelligentsia in communist societies. They have never been satisfactorily put together. Western blind spots are increased by a research focus on academic and research specialists and what they write rather than on professionals and their work. Those with whom we have been the least concerned are the practitioners who, like journalists, after all, help create policy from their positions in advisory bodies and who take policy and remold it in their day to day work as professionals.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, research on the policy process that has focused on individual policies and their implementation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has generally concluded that involved professionals, like "the managers, teachers, educators and scientists" Joel Schwartz and William Keech found to have been the most influential in blocking Khrushchev's educational reform proposal,<sup>25</sup> are the most powerful actors. Yet little is known about why this happens since professional opposition to leadership policies is seldom actually sanctioned or publicized. The impetus for action is assumed to be the desire on the part of individuals "to protect interests derived from occupational roles," as is true for any professional in Western society.<sup>26</sup> The power of these professionals and their specialist counterparts is, further, seen in Western professional literature as deriving from "their technical expertise, their indispensability to the ruling circles, and their access to influential media of communication,"<sup>27</sup> as well as from their less well defined ability to drag their feet or reinterpret the policies they are to follow.<sup>28</sup>

The entrance and involvement of these specialists and professionals into the policy process has been seen by Western researchers as being a result of an invitation from or the weakness of the political leadership.<sup>29</sup> Although the totalitarianism of Stalinist control seems to have been far less strict than it appeared in the 1950s, it is clear that both the level of group activity and the visibility of that activity have increased with the technological modernization of the post-Stalin years. The increase in the technological knowledge and sophistication required for decisions to be made has clearly increased political leaders' propensity to seek advice and defer to it or to allow professionals ever in-

10 **Poland's journalists**

creasing autonomy in the performance of their roles.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the simply technological imperatives, political leaders' increasing claims of deference to specialist and professional interests also have been used as a measure of their desire to involve and integrate an increasingly complex and educated population in the policy process. The claim then is that leadership decisions come from experts and are not politically motivated.<sup>31</sup>

Western theorists have differed on the fundamental nature of groups in these societies. Claims of full comparability between groups and group input in communist societies and pluralist Western societies are not made either in group theory (which has never dealt with "the communist case")<sup>32</sup> or by those who have sought to apply that interest group theory, however imperfect the fit, to behavior in communist states.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, few parallels have been drawn, in theory or in actual research, between the behavior and demands of specific groups in the West and in the Soviet bloc.

The variety of definitions of "group" in communist politics given in 1969 demonstrates the disagreement among theorists on the nature of "groups" and on the key lines of social and political division in communist societies. In the ensuing years, that definition has been made no clearer:

Brzezinski and Huntington see policy-relevant groups as forming principally upon occupational lines (and at the upper reaches of the Soviet elite), such as the military, the state bureaucracy, the Party apparatchiki, etc. Meyer, cautioning against all attempts at an *a priori* listing, suggests that interest groups may form around issues or individual political leaders or bureaucrats, in addition to occupations. Barghoorn, following Leonard, argues that the major policy groupings do not form along occupational lines but cut across these to coalesce around issue orientations. They are most usefully identified as "modernizers and conservatives, revisionists and dogmatists." Skilling and Griffiths similarly conclude that groupings most frequently form around issues, but unlike Barghoorn, they see a great multiplicity of viewpoints . . . Brzezinski, Azrael, and Barghoorn stress the Party's formal monopoly over decision making and the weakness of interest groups. At the same time, they suggest that certain groups, especially those with relatively high institutional cohesion, such as the military, may occasionally act as successful veto groups, successfully resisting Kremlin pressures. Meyer, while pointing out the serious lack of knowledge of Soviet policy making processes, suggests that the interests of a wide variety of groups are considered by Soviet decision-makers. At the same time, he con-