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PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF JOURNALISTS *THEN* AND *NOW*: A PERSPECTIVE OF JOURNALISTS FROM SOUTHEAST SERBIA[2, 3, 4, 5]

Abstract. *The journalistic profession has faced many challenges in recent decades. Market pressure, the emergence of non-media actors producing content, and a shrinking audience interested in the news are just some of the challenges that media professionals are facing on a daily basis in the age of convergence culture (Deuze, 2008; Donsbach, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). If we observe these issues in the context of countries that do not have a long democratic tradition, the challenges become even more pronounced, which may result in a decline in this profession's reputation, and even in the loss or crisis of professional identity (Donsbach, 2009). Starting from the structural elements of the professional identity of journalists (Deuze, 2008), an in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with ten journalists employed in different types of media in Niš. In order to be in a position to compare the period before and after the socio-political and technological transition, for which we take the year 2000, all interviewed journalists were born before 1980, and have at least 15 years of experience in journalism. Thematic analysis of the interviews shows that, in the opinion of journalists, the status of journalism as a profession is constantly declining; that the crisis of journalists' identity is caused by commercialization, convergence and market pressure, but that it is the socio-political circumstances that have the greatest impact on the (self) perception of journalism as a profession.*

Key words: *identity of journalists, status of journalists, perspective of journalists, southeast of Serbia, in-depth interview*

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, scholars have often focused on the changes in media and professional identity of journalists caused by technological development. Those challenges have indeed made a great impact on media professionals and their everyday work (Malmelin & Villi, 2017; Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007). Some authors stress that journalists are losing their role as "gatekeepers" of information and primary definers of news, at least in the way they were before the Internet era. Others argue that journalism as a profession is losing its importance, moreover, it will become insignificant. Many of those standpoints can be summarized by Donsbach's words: "The problem we are observing with journalism is not a disappearing occupation but a disappearing social function" (2009: 43). In this article we focus on the 'disappearance of this social function' by examining changes in the professional identity of journalists in the context of (post)transitional society. We start by briefly outlining approaches to journalistic identity and describing our analytical framework.

As Wolfgang Donsbach noted, "The identity of journalism as a profession lives on the assumption 'I know it when I see it'" (2009: 38). This line illustrates how many approaches in the research of the journalistic profession exist. We can perceive journalists as mediators who spread objective information and serve the public (*Public Service Tradition*), or as professional communicators who create public opinion by pursuing subjective goals presented as public good (*Subjective Tradition*), or as media industry workers paid to do their job, mainly driven by economic interests (*Commercial Tradition*) (Donsbach, 2009). Either way, we must consider the complexity of their profession, and the multitude of influences on journalism – from technological changes (Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 2008) to socio-political circumstances, both global and national.

One of the approaches with the longest tradition in journalism studies is based on the functionalist framework. From the functionalist point of view the professional identity of journalists is based on three elements: *ensuring collective cohesion*, *achieving social function* and *creating a common ideology* that reflects on the work of journalists (Le Cam, Pereira & Ruellan, 2019). The functionalist approach has been critiqued primarily because it insists on normative principles, excludes diversity of practice, context, and individual preferences of journalists.

From the 1990, the cultural turn has been noted in journalism studies with the work of Zelizer (1992) and journalistic identity has been observed as part of journalistic cultures across the globe (e.g., Hanitzscht, 2019). In this rich research tradition, journalistic identity is closely connected with journalistic roles understood as "the way journalists perceive, articulate, and enact generalized expectations as to how journalism is serving society, both in normative and descriptive terms" (Hanitzsch 2019: 1). Besides Tomas Hanitzsch's "Worlds of journalism study" in recent years a comparative research of journalistic role performance has been led by Claudia Mellado (e.g., Mellado et al., 2017). Both large scale comparative projects have contributed to our knowledge about the journalistic profession as

dependent on the context in which it operates and provided valuable insight into the heterogeneity of journalistic identity. Therefore, it can be argued that this approach answers to shortcomings of functionalism, but according to Le Cam, Pereira and Ruellan (2019: 2), "though comparative research addresses the plurality of social roles and conceptions inherent in journalism, journalistic identity remains normative and media-centric".

Starting from the idea of journalism as a culture which is shaped by socio-political circumstances, as well as the materiality and the contradictions of news production, we apply Deuze's (2008) structural elements of professional identity, partly modified to the research context, as an analytical framework. According to Deuze (2008), journalism identity consists of: "the status and protection (by law) of the profession, ethical guidelines of one's organization (if any), budgets, preferred sources (every news organization has its own range of experts), market characteristics, set routines and rituals on the work floor, ownership" (p. 112). We apply this framework to examine the changes in the professional identity of journalists in Serbia since the democratic transition which started in 2000.

2. Previous research about the journalistic profession in Serbia

Since the democratic turn in 2000, research about the journalistic profession in Serbia has been relatively rare, while data about the media industry and professional community has been scarce and fragmentary. Therefore, our knowledge and understanding of the journalistic profession, culture and identity is still in its infancy. One of the most thorough studies of the professional community in Serbia, conducted in 2010/11, was aimed at mapping journalism transformation, considering the technological and economic challenges. However, this research highlighted the lack of available data about the professional community in Serbia, including the number of working journalists. Similarly, the number of media outlets was not reliable, media ownership, circulation and reach obscured, as well as overall national advertising and market data. Therefore, the survey done within this study provided the first comprehensive overview of the structure and status of the journalistic profession after the year 2000, showing that most journalists were highly educated, worked for broadcast media, and had stable employment contracts. However, journalists have ranked low wages as the biggest problem of the profession, closely after low quality of journalism and tabloidization, political pressure, and economic instability of the media companies. Conversely, they found common challenges brought by the advancement of new communication technologies that journalists in the western context faced as largely insignificant (Milivojević, 2012; Radojković, Milojević and Ugrinić, 2014).

Milojević and Krstić (2018) have analyzed qualitative interviews conducted with journalists and media owners within this research, along with interviews from two other studies, and summarized influences on transitional journalism within a hierarchy of influences model from 2003 to 2015. This analysis provided an

overview of the persistent patterns of corruptive behavior, enduring clientelism between politicians, owners of advertising agencies, business tycoons and the state, which keeps journalists and media system in a constant transitional position, with fluctuations in the slow process of democratization (Milojević and Krstić, 2018: 51). Jungblut and Hoxha (2017) research, based also on in-depth interviews with journalists, showed how such conditions lead to a wide spread of self-censorship. They have connected self-censorship to external political and economic pressure, and a lack of clear and applicable ethical guidelines. Their main conclusion that "journalists in the Western Balkans react to external pressure in such a way that they avoid open conflict with the political and economically powerful", leading "to a state of co-existence where they exchange 'favors'" (Jungblut and Hoxha, 2017: 235) is clearly in line with Milojević and Krstić (2018) findings.

Other studies based on document, regulatory and structural analysis are in line with these quantitative and qualitative research findings. Kisić (2015: 95) underlined that the media, after the change of regime in 2000, have "remained servile to governmental officials and political elites". Kmezić (2018: 481) listed "lack of transparency in media funding and media ownership, strong economic dependence of media workers, lack of adequate protection for journalists, pressure from interconnected political and business groups" as causes of "creeping self-censorship" in the Serbian media. He argued that the absence of strong journalistic associations additionally aggravated their position. Similarly, Milutinović (2019: 1066) stressed that self-regulatory instruments have not stimulated the "emancipation of professional journalism against political pressures and financial blackmail in the process of the media system transition" and pointed out that the media have often served partial interests of their financiers rather than the public interest.

Overall, previous studies have portrayed a rather homogenous picture of the journalistic profession captured in transition, instrumentalized by political and economic elites, unable to self-organize and achieve professional autonomy. Starting from that picture, we aim to contribute to our knowledge about the professional identity of journalists by addressing the question of continuity and change. We examine journalists' self-perception of changes in professional identity during their careers to provide novel insights into transformations of different professional identity elements during the democratic transition in Serbia. In this article, we analyze perceptions of the local journalists from Southeast Serbia. However, we argue that their perceptions are representative of the overall changes in professional identity, since local media and journalism are more sensitive to all challenges in the media sphere than national media (Vujović, Obradović, Pavlović, 2019; Prokopović, Jevtović, Jovanović, 2019; Vulić, Aleksić, Mitrović, 2019). Therefore, we believe that we can provide an even more nuanced portrayal of the identity changes by taking local scope, rather than national, for this study.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the main research question, how the professional identity of journalists in southeastern Serbia has changed over time and what circumstances have influenced these changes, a thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews

was conducted. Interviews were designed to gather journalists' perceptions of changes in the structural elements of a journalist's professional identity according to Deuze (2008): *professional elements on which a journalist's identity is based* (Q1); *social status or reputation of journalists in a society* (Q2); *protection of journalists, which is reflected through legislation, self-regulation and self-organization in the form of journalists' associations, collegiality* (Q3); *financial stability of journalists and the impact of economic uncertainty on the daily work of journalists* (Q4); *media market in terms of media pluralism, but also the position of the media in the market* (Q5). All the questions contained a comparative component. The journalists were asked to compare the mentioned professional elements *then* and *now* – and make a temporal reflection on the professional elements.

Time determinants used throughout the paper are *then* and *now*. The determinant *then* implies the beginnings of journalistic careers of the interviewed media professionals. In some cases, it was the beginning of the 2000s, in others, the mid-1980s. Either way, it refers to the period before socio-political changes in Serbia, or at least the beginning of the transitional period. In this research context, it is insignificant whether journalists refer to the period from 20 or 30 years ago, but it is necessary to point out the changes that the journalistic profession has gone through over decades of their work. The determinant *now*, apart from the current moment, covers almost the entire previous decade, because, as the interviewed journalists pointed out, it was a period of major structural economic and socio-political changes which brought some new challenges and uncertainties to the journalistic profession.

Interviews were conducted with ten journalists, representatives of different types of media (television, radio, press, online media and news agencies), with different editorial policies (public service, media recognized as pro-regime or pro-opposition) and with different employment contracts (full-time employees, freelancers and correspondents). Furthermore, selected study participants had to have over 15 years of experience in journalism and to be born before 1980 in order to be able to talk about the period of socio-political changes in Serbia. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 to 60 minutes, and the interviews were conducted in November and December 2021. In the presentation of research results, we refer to the interviewed journalists with code marks from J1 to J10.

4. Findings

i. **Professional elements on which a journalist's identity is based**

Interviewed media professionals recognize work in the public interest and the intrigue and/or attractiveness of the journalistic work as crucial in deciding to start a professional journalistic career, and to remain working for decades. Speaking about the professional elements of journalists in the past, one of the interviewed journalists said: "Back then, a journalist was a very important factor in society and every journalist wanted to contribute to some truth and some investigation" (J3). Perceiving themselves as factors that can fundamentally change society, the

interviewed journalists at the beginning of their careers had idealistic ideas about journalism and their place in society: "My desire was to change the world around me. That was my first motive" (J4).

The work of a journalist, which requires constant presence, activity and daily challenges, certainly is highly specific and requires professionals who are naturally curious. The attractiveness of journalism in terms of working with people and developing curiosity is another element that was recognized as the first impulse for many interviewed journalists to become interested in the journalistic profession: "It was essentially a challenge for me to work with people, to have a job which doesn't imply the same work every day. I graduated in law, but even then, I knew that wouldn't be my profession. The job of a journalist was more intriguing and challenging for me" (J5). Similarly, J6 states: "Being at the most interesting events in the city becomes your habit over time."

The desire to discover the truth, to change social circumstances and the tendency to criticize were the key elements upon which the interviewed media professionals built their professional identity at the beginning of their careers. One of the interviewed journalists said: "Maybe I was lucky to start working in one of the most democratic media outlets in our region at the time. It was TV5. There, we were taught to always have a critical opinion about anything, to always have two sides to every story. Nowadays, that is almost gone" (J8).

The interviewed media professionals agreed that the elements upon which journalists build their professional identity today differ from those which they identified themselves with as journalists decades ago. They emphasize the desire of journalists for self-promotion as the main difference, and commercial orientation at the expense of work in the public interest was also recognized as a significant element: "Nowadays, it is more important for journalists to be visible in a public space, as some kind of self-marketing; this can be achieved through some superficial sensationalist work" (J1). However, the interviewees agreed that there had always been journalists who were approaching this job for reasons other than pure love for a profession: "Then, as well as now, we had two groups of people – one group wanted to do this job as an everyday profession, and the other perceived journalism as a stepping stone for the public sector or for some PR position" (J4).

Some of the interviewed professionals characterized today's work of journalists as propaganda, not seeing a way for journalists to do their job in the current socio-political circumstances in Serbia, without being the subject of instrumentalization: "Those who are starting a profession in journalism nowadays are faced with nothing else but propaganda [...] Especially if they report on political issues" (J3). However, journalists point out that in every period there are journalists who build their identity around true values and, valid professional elements: "My personal opinion is that young people choose journalism as their profession, because they think that by doing this job, they can change something they don't like, that they will be able to influence changes in the society they live in" (J2). Similarly, J1 states: "There is a smaller number of those who are engaged in investigative journalism and recognizable in public as such, although I think that the first [personal promotion] is more dominant" (J1).

ii. **Social status or reputation of journalists in society**

The struggle of journalists for the status of journalism as an autonomous profession, worthy of social respect, is a continuous process which began with the earliest development of journalism (Le Cam, Pereira, Ruellan, 2019). All interviewed journalists talked nostalgically about the earlier period, when journalists were honored and respected in society: "Journalism used to be a respected profession, and an extremely valued one; journalists were required to be educated, versatile, and on the other hand they were rewarded for their work. [...] More important than the financial side is that we, as journalists, were appreciated in the environments we lived in. People respected us, they cared about our opinion. They also cared about sharing their opinion with us. We were always welcome" (J2). Observed as educated, versatile and professional, a journalist was extremely respected and reputable (J2, J3, J4, J10) – *a journalist with a capital J* (N3). "Being a journalist was a privilege" (J9).

Although aware that journalists have never had a well-deserved status in society, interviewed media professionals agree that the status of journalists as a professional group in Serbia has lost importance over the years: "When I started doing this work [early 2000s], journalists were already subject to the instrumentalization of the government, but I think that nowadays that has reached its extremes. I think that, as in the whole society, there is a division between *ours* and *theirs*, that division is initiated by political power-holders [...] I think that journalists are less trusted than they were when I started doing this job, although it has never been at an enviable level, but now it's irreversibly gone downhill" (J1). When it comes to the status of journalists in today's Serbia, other interviewees also testified about the dizzying decline: "In 25 years, it all turned upside down. The attitude towards us, as journalists, has also changed. We no longer belong to the category of people who are engaged in a profession that is respected in society, we have been reduced to the level of a scorer who takes notes" (J2).

Loss of trust in journalists is one of the most common examples the interviewed journalists used to illustrate the unfavorable status of journalists in Serbia. Journalists listed various causes that led to this change in the perception of journalists in society, from the **systemic** ones: "political environment and transition" (J1); "media owners in alliance with politicians" (J2); "leading political structures" (J3); "employment through party ties" (J6); "tabloidization of media, lifestyle, and sensationalism in reporting" (J9); "struggle to maintain the status quo" (J8), to the **individual** ones, caused by systemic socio-political changes: "Journalists, that is, quasi-journalists have voluntarily agreed to be servants, that is the problem. We have voluntarily agreed to be manipulated" (J4); "There have been changes in our mindset, because no one is thinking about free journalism anymore. [...] When we write, we try not to do anything that could endanger our existence" (J2); "Journalists who were very cheap so they sold themselves; they started working for politics, politicians, for interest [...] they stopped being journalists, they became propagandists" (J3); "Material position and personal interest" (J4); "One gets the impression that anyone can be a journalist" (J5).

iii. **Protection of journalists (institutional and professional)**

The position of journalists in society is greatly influenced by the institutional and professional protection they enjoy. Respect for journalists

and the journalistic profession as an important segment of society is reflected, among other things, in protection by the legislative framework and professional associations. In both senses, journalists in Serbia have never enjoyed a high level of protection. However, interviewed journalists believe that in recent years every type of protection has been at a very low level. "Associations provide legal support, but that is poor protection, because journalists, with or without the association's lawyer, go through the same thing in court, since we know that lawsuits are mostly rejected in the pre-investigation phase. As far as legal protection is concerned, I don't know if it is worse now or in the 1990s, but it seems to me that nothing has been significantly improved" (J1). J9 states: "In the last 10 years, there have been more and more attacks on journalists, intimidation, beatings, regardless of the law that should protect journalists. I think that there were fewer cases before, although the legal framework has never been aligned". J4 has a similar opinion: "I think that journalists are not protected, neither then nor now. I think a journalist must have the status of an authorized person".

Solidarity among journalists has been a frequent topic in Serbia in recent years[6]. Journalists are often harassed[7] even at live press conferences, and colleagues rarely stand up for each other: "We had situations in the field when all journalists should've left the event as an act of solidarity, but that almost never happens. "(J5). Interviewees recognized the unenviable existential position of journalists, who are under constant pressure from media owners and politicians in power, as the main reason for the lack of collegiality: [...] I think we are standing alone on some edge, I don't know which one, but we are lonely there" (J2). J4 also testified about the pressures: "We will sympathize with the journalists who experienced harassment and humiliation. But what kind of protection is that? If you raise your voice, you will be fired the next day. The message is: *Be Quiet!*".

"Even today, regardless of working for different media where owners are often in some kind of conflict, a colleague will not leave one colleague stranded [...] because we are the ones in the field, we are in this together, we have the same job" (J2). This kind of response was common, which indicates that "journalists identify themselves more easily with the profession of journalism than, for example, with the medium or media company that employs them" (Deuze, 2005: 446). Support remains in the field, while few journalists speak up publicly: "When it comes to the persecution of journalists, colleagues do not stand publicly for their colleagues, as they have not stood before" (J5). Most of the interviewed media professionals highlight that solidarity is higher at the local level in comparison with solidarity among journalists working in national media. They explained it by the smaller

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[6] For example, see article: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/gde-je-nestala-novinarska-solidarnost-u-srbiji/ accessed January 22nd, 2022

[7] For example, see: Article 1: https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a115681-gasic-volim-novinarke-koje-ovako-lako-kleknu/ Article 2: https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a671009-zaklina-tatalovic-kako-je-vucic-poceo-da-se-ljuti-na-mene/ Article 3: https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/premijerka-optuzila-n1-da-fabrikuje-afere-i-vodi-kampanju-protiv-trece-doze/ accessed January 22nd, 2022

number of journalists at the local level and the fact that everyone knows each other personally.

iv. **Financial stability of journalists and the impact of economic uncertainty on the daily work of journalists**

The financial stability of journalists is an indicator that reflects the position and respect for the journalistic profession in society, as well as the personal position of journalists and their attitude towards work. The job of a journalist has never been overpaid, especially when it comes to local media. For example, journalists in the local media in Niš have an average salary in the amount of the national minimum, around 30,000 dinars (Vujović, Obradović, Pavlović, 2019: 43-44). Most of the interviewed journalists, who work in the local media, stated that they work for a national minimum salary, although that question was not directly asked: "Employers are guided by the fact that journalism is a job you do because you love it, and that you will do it even if they don't pay you enough. Now you are even more limited, you are not allowed to write everything, there is no freedom, and, above all of that, you are not even paid for your work" (J8).

All journalists agreed that the financial situation was better before, although they also stated that the work of journalists was never adequately paid: "As political stability changed, fees were dropping more and more, there was no increase, the minimum salary is standard for most newsrooms south of Belgrade" (J9). However, stability in terms of regular payments and carelessness in terms of a safer job position are reasons journalists especially emphasize (J2, J3, J4, J6, J7, J10). According to the journalists, the challenges brought by the transition in the context of media restructuring – *media ownership*, *media deregulation*, *financing models*, etc. – have led to financial insecurity, lower salaries, constant fear of losing jobs, worse employment contracts and, paradoxically, greater media dependence.

v. **Media market**

The issue of the media market is related to the previous one about financial stability, as one inevitably affects the other. The media market in Serbia became chaotic after the 2000s (Tomić, 2016). On the one hand, the establishment of many new media, the privatization of the existing media, and on the other hand, the closure of many media during or shortly after the process of privatization, created an atmosphere of uncertainty and put journalists in an unenviable position. Until recently, media that had a secure income (for example, local city media) found themselves after privatization in a harsh market and many of them did not survive it. According to the interviewed journalists, the possibility of establishing new media (almost uncontrolled) did not bring pluralism and quality in the media landscape (J1 - J10). Economic uncertainty has become even more pronounced. However, local media journalists do not link this uncertainty to a lack of advertisers and a weak market, but directly to political pressures and the influence of the ruling parties on their work, as well as to the new models of media financing. In that context, J8 explains: "You have to be politically eligible to get advertising and/or to have connection with someone from the ruling party to help you with that [...] it was not like that before, back then you had a television's name and a rating that was not obtained

because you are close to the authorities, but because you have a realistic rating and a good-quality program".

Another possibility when it comes to media financing is co-financing projects[8], which is also one of the challenges that all journalists mentioned as one of the most harmful to media freedom: "Almost everyone is financed by projects and the state practically keeps the media on an even shorter leash than before and they are still in a precarious position" (J1). Local media are economically reduced to complete dependence on project co-financing: "Project financing means you're doing projects; the project is approved by someone and you are limited in your work. The one who approved the project pays you and therefore you have to meet his expectations and obey all their demands; that also kills journalism. If the project doesn't work out, you run out of money" (J2). Journalists oppose this type of media financing and believe that it is just another way of controlling the media by the authorities: "I am a big opponent of project financing, because when it was designed it was thought that journalists would be more independent, but it turned out that it works on the principle 'I'll give something to you, if you give something back to me'. They give each other funds so that most of the money goes to several media outlets. Moreover, if you are funded by the city, you are again dependent and not independent" (J3). This type of media financing has shown a great blackmailing potential of political officials, especially at the local level, although these pressures cannot be proved, because the projects of certain media can be rejected by the committee for various reasons, seemingly justified: "Media funding, project-based, has put the media in a position to think about whether or not to criticize – for example, if they criticize a lot this year, they may not get the money next year. The fact is that the media in Serbia cannot survive in these conditions. Although it is taxpayers' money [project co-funding], it is not recognized as that in public" (J4). According to journalists, local media in Serbia have been brought to the brink of extinction. They cannot survive if they are not pro-regime oriented: "How not to rely on project financing and to be financed totally commercially if you are a small local media? What if you are not politically eligible?" (J8).

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[8] For more information on this type of financing, see: Tomić, B. G. (2016). Projektno sufinansiranje medija u deregulacionom ključu. *Srpska politička misao*. (3), 43-58. https://ips.ac.rs/publications/projektno-sufinansiranje-medija-u-deregulacionom-kljucu/

Table 1 Outline of the main research findings – excerpts from
the interviews with journalists

Research question	Key lines (excerpts) from the interviews with journalist
Then and now	
(Q1): Professional elements on which a journalist's identity is based	**Then:** "Analytics and research work"; "Critical attitude towards all social events"; "The desire to change the world around me"; "The desire to erase differences and boundaries between people."
	Now: "There are few who [today] are engaged in real, investigative journalism"; "Self-marketing"; "Desire for public work"; "A turning point towards a higher goal"; "Profit orientation".
(Q2): Social status or reputation of journalists in society	**Then:** "Journalism used to be a highly valued profession"; "People just respected us, they cared about our opinion"; "The journalist was welcome everywhere, now they are playing with journalists, insulting journalists"; "We have been reduced to a level of scorer"; "We have voluntarily agreed to be manipulated"; "I am sometimes ashamed to say that I am a journalist".
	Now (causes): "A transition that takes too long"; "Media financing"; "Political environment"; "Media owners in alliance with politicians"; "Journalists who were very cheap, so they sold themselves"; "Political and material interests"; "Employment through party connections"; "The struggle to maintain the status quo.
(Q3): Protection of journalists (institutional and professional)	**Then:** "We used to show more solidarity"; "Journalists are not protected, neither then or now";
	Now: "Today, lawsuits are mostly rejected in the pre-investigation phase"; "Colleagues do not stand publicly up for their colleagues, as they have not stood before"; "If you are defending someone now, you are exposing yourself to the danger of being exposed to the same persecution." "If you raise your voice, the next day you can get fired, the message is: *Be quiet!";* "Professional associations are also divided, because they follow divisions in society"; "A journalist must have the status of an authorized person."
(Q4): Financial stability of journalists and the impact of economic uncertainty on the daily work of journalists	**Then:** "The financial situation has never actually been good"; "We may not have been in a much better financial position before, but we were much more carefree";
	Now: "Being a journalist today means that you are literally brought to the edge of existence"; "They caused us the greatest damage through project financing"; "Objectively speaking, we are materially on the lowest social level." "The situation journalists are in is catastrophic"; "Most journalists work part-time for several media outlets"; "Now you are limited, you are not allowed to write everything, there is no freedom, and above all of that you are not paid for your work";
(Q5): Media market	**Then:** "Earlier, the rating of television was not obtained because you are close to the government, but because you have a realistic rating and a quality program." "The quality of today's media is much, much worse than when we had only one state media, although criticized for being dependent, the quality of our program was exceptional";
	Now: "More media outlets haven't brought greater pluralism"; "The new media market has not brought us quality"; "It seems that the media image of Serbia has never been worse"; "The fact is that the media in Serbia cannot survive"; "There are many media outlets that do not deserve to be called media"; "You have to be politically eligible to get advertisers or project financing";

5. Discussion and conclusion

Changes in the field of technological progress, digitalization and the transition to the online sphere, certainly pose challenges to local media and affect the professional identity of journalists. However, in a post-transition country and a hybrid regime[9] such as Serbia, the biggest challenges are economic status and political influence. The status and identity of journalists is influenced, above all, by the uncertain economic position of both the media and journalists and the instrumentalization of the media and journalists by the authorities. The overall socio-political environment has led to journalists no longer being thought of as educated, versatile professionals working in the public interest (and as interviewed journalists testify, this was the case at the beginning of their careers), but as propagandists. One of the journalists (J5) stated: "Sometimes I am ashamed to say that I am a journalist, and that was not the case before". This sentence summarizes the self-perception of most of the interviewed journalists. Whether they find the reasons for the erosion of the profession in systemic changes or in the individual guilt of journalists who did not resist the pressure, most journalists admit that they work under pressure and that they often agree to that pressure. Self-censorship stands out as the most common element in conversations with journalists, although none of them confessed it directly. However, through the statements "if we criticize, we lose our jobs" or "we cannot rebel because we have been brought to the edge of existence", it is clear that journalists in the local media in Niš are in an unenviable position.

During the in-depth interviews, we noticed that journalists inserted politics in every answer, even when the question had no direct connection with political influence. Therefore, we can conclude that political pressure is still the most aggravating force shaping journalism in transitional contexts. Journalists in the local media are exposed to daily political pressure, open or covert, intertwined with economic dependence on city authorities. The statements of one of the participants (J2) that journalists are reduced to the level of scorer, or J3 stating that today's journalists are propagandists, show the way journalists perceive themselves and their colleagues.

There is an important difference between journalists who work for only one local media and those who work as correspondents for national media, public services or news agencies. The former are exposed to direct pressure, but they speak about it quite openly and critically, aware of their position and the position of their colleagues. Others are less burdened by political influence and economic difficulties when it comes to self-perception, but when it comes to the perception of journalism in Serbia as a whole, they also recognize political pressure as the main issue.

In conversations, local media journalists often compare their position with colleagues who work for national media outlets, stating that they are not in the same financial position, and that journalists in larger media have "decent" employment

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[9] See Freedom House Report, 2021: https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2021, accessed January 22nd, 2022

contracts and "decent" salaries. They also stated that only journalists working for large private media that are not pro-regime oriented are not subject to instrumentalization by the authorities and are in a good financial position. Moreover, "Journalists working for foreign-owned media are in a better position than others" (J2). With this statement, this journalist pointed out the distrust in the media owners originating from Serbia, because, as she believes, all of them are inevitably in contact with politicians in power, and their motive for purchasing media outlets was inherently political.

Overall, our results correspond highly to previous research, indicating almost no changes in professional identity in the last couple of years. While their western counterparts struggle with challenges brought by the digital revolution, journalists in Serbia are still struggling with political and economic issues of transition to democracy and are nostalgic about the period before the nineties. Comparing the periods defined as *then* and *now*, all journalists agree that the journalistic profession has lost its former status and that their position in each segment is worse or the same as in the 90s (period of crisis and war). In such socio-political circumstances, journalists lose their professional identity, accept pressure and, as we can see, are very aware of that. However, most of them do not see a way to change things, while they nostalgically remember the past and their former status.

In future studies, it would be interesting to compare the responses of journalists in local media with the responses of journalists working for the major national media and find out if they differ, given that local journalists have often made that comparison themselves in interviews.

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PROFESIONALNI IDENTITET NOVINARA NEKAD I SAD: PERSPEKTIVA NOVINARA SA JUGOISTOKA SRBIJE

Apstrakt *Profesija novinarstva suočava se sa mnogobrojnim izazovima poslednjih decenija. Pritisak tržišta, pojava nemedijskih aktera koji proizvode sadržaj, smanjenje publike koja je zainteresovana za vesti, samo su neki od izazova sa kojima se medijski profesionalci u doba kulture konvergencije svakodnevno suočavaju (Deuze, 2008; Donsbach, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). Ukoliko sve navedeno posmatramo u kontekstu zemalja koje nemaju dugu demokratsku tradiciju, izazovi postaju još izraženiji, što može rezultirati opadanjem ugleda profesije, pa i gubitkom, ili krizom, profesionalnog identiteta (Donsbach, 2009).*

Polazeći od strukturnih elemenata profesionalnog identiteta novinara (Deuze, 2008), sprovedeni su dubinski polustrukturisani intervjui sa deset novinara zaposlenih u različitim tipovima medija u Nišu. Kako bi bili u poziciji da uporede svoj položaj u periodu pre i posle društveno-političke i tehnološke tranzicije, za koju u ovom radu uzimamo 2000 godinu, svi novinari su rođeni pre 1980. godine, i imaju minimum 15 godina iskustva u bavljenju novinarstvom.

Tematska analiza intervjua pokazuje da je prema mišljenju novinara status novinarstva kao profesije u konstantnom opadanju; da krizi identiteta novinara doprinose komercijalizacija, konvergencija i pritisak tržišta, ali da su društveno-političke okolnosti te koje imaju najveći uticaj na (samo)percepciju novinarstva kao profesije.

Ključne reči: *identitet novinara, status novinara, perspektiva novinara, jugoistok Srbije, dubinski intervju*