

MASS MEDIA IN ROMANIA IN 2014 - 2015

„In Romania, it is a challenge to save journalism, not the publications” (Alexandru Lăzescu, Revista 22)

1. Foreword

The current study presents synthetically both the issues the media and the journalists have to cope with and the possible solutions, as seen by the Romanian media community.

The study is based on over one hundred interviews with managers, editors, journalists in the local and mainstream media conducted by the team of the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) from October 2014 to April 2015: 120 hours of interviews with journalists in 21 cities - Bistrița, Târgu Mureș, Cluj, Botoșani, Iași, Focșani, Buzău, Galați, Slobozia, Alexandria, Timișoara, Arad, Oradea, Satu Mare, Zalău, Alba Iulia, Brașov, Sibiu, Deva, București și Petroșani. Some of the statements in the report are anonymous as the interviewees wanted to protect their position in the newsroom or on the market.

In January 2016 the analysis was updated so as to include the main trends throughout the previous year. We added information collected in our daily work, following dialogues with media experts and journalists.

The current analysis is not precise, quantitative, and exhaustive. We actually believe that such an analysis is almost impossible and would soon become obsolete, when it comes to such a dynamic environment, hardly analysed scientifically. The present report is *a scan of the grassroots media issues*.

The interviews and the analysis are part of the program **Strengthening the Convention of Media Organizations**, coordinated by CIJ and implemented in partnership with Centras. The project aims to enhance the capacity of journalists' professional organizations to support the moral and legal interests of the media community and of the public alike, on a market badly affected by economic problems and low trust in the media.

The Convention of Media Organizations (COM) was established in 2002 with the aim to give more visibility and negotiation capacities to mass media professionals. COM is an informal coalition of journalists' associations, media professionals, trade unions and media owners' organizations that have identified common action plans in order to strengthen the media sector in Romania and promote its interests. CIJ and Active Watch have provided the secretariat services for COM.

Eversince its establishment, COM has organized meetings or conferences on relevant topics and has reacted whenever its principles were in danger. In 2004 COM produced and adopted two self-regulating documents – *The Journalist Statute* and *COM Ethics Code*, which represent the highlight of their activity so far. Later on (2009), COM was instrumental in producing and

adopting a unified Ethics Code, which summarizes the provisions of fifteen different self-regulation documents.¹

2. Introduction

„What do people want? What do we all want? To solve our problems. Media have forgotten to do that.” (Cătălin Moraru, Monitorul de Botoșani)

If we were to summarize the state of the media at this moment, *fear* would be the most appropriate word. It is the journalists' fear that they may lose their job, the fear that they might not get their salary at the end of the month, the fear of their owner, of politicians, of authorities. The fear of the managers who are trying to survive on a market on the verge of collapse, where competition rules are often broken, the fear the advertising might disappear, the fear of the state institutions that may interfere with long and abusive controls at all times. And, why not, the fear of those who have broken the laws and now are afraid that the state mechanisms might start to function. The watchdog of democracy is more scared than ever.

The Romanian media crisis worsened in 2014. There was less money on the market and most of it went to mainstream television². Low sales and decreasing audience, distribution issues, public money advertising allocated arbitrarily, and, lately, various interpretations of the Romanian fiscal and labour legislation affected the media businesses. Bringing insignificant changes on the media market, 2015 was more or less the same.

In their turn, journalists complain about the salaries which are getting lower, the lack of predictability and about the job insecurity, the busy schedule and the increasing tasks.

The audience consider the media to be profoundly vitiated, complain about the bad products, sometimes condemn the media mistakes, but are not willing to pay for quality content and change their media consumption habits so as to sanction those they criticise. Moreover, a good journalist does not enjoy a very large audience. *„It takes weeks to work on an investigation relevant for the community, but we know that an accident, even without casualties, brings ten times higher traffic”*, said Hannelore Petrovai, manager of the online publication *hunedoaramea.ro*

In the 2014 electoral year, the professionalism suffered deeply: the language deteriorated seriously, while media became more aggressive, both at a national and local level. *„The environment has changed, swearing has become something normal, if one does not swear, they will be perceived as weak. Normality has changed”*, says Alexandru Lăzescu, the president of the editorial board of *Ziarul de Iași*, editor-in-chief of *22 weekly* and coordinator of the Journalism and Communication Science Department of *Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași*.

Obviously, there are still honest professionals, that keep the standards as much as possible. However, they seem to be just few exceptions. *„The news on the generalist channels is usually*

¹ The Ethics Code is available at: <http://www.cji.ro/?p=2263>.

² <http://www.paginademedi.ro/2014/05/posturile-pro-tv-au-luat-jumatate-din-banii-din-piata-anul-trecut-intact-aproape-o-treime-asteptarile-pietei-dupa-mutarile-din-pro-tv-si-antena-1/>

correct. On the contrary, news channels very often jump to unchecked information, render irresponsible statements, invite commentators ready to talk about anything, anytime, who only make things worse. The situation is even more dramatic in the online media, where usually anonymity rules. Disseminating rumors, often from obscure websites, is a national sport”, claims Petrișor Obae (manager, *paginademedia.ro*). „Professional integrity is rare, but it hasn’t completely disappeared”. „With such divided media, the few enclaves of journalistic independence can hardly be seen or are always pointed at because allegedly they belong to one group or another” says Brîndușa Armanca, television journalist and professor at *Aurel Vlaicu University* in Arad.

Due to the very bad program quality, local television channels have extremely low audience. That way, the public sanctions an information offer that does not match their needs. The digital switchover, globally scheduled for 17 June 2015, was postponed in the last minute. (The system will bring access to more frequencies, yet local tv channels will have to pay for it). On 10 June 2015, a Government emergency ordinance amended the Audiovisual law and extended the period for the digital switchover to 31 December 2016. According to estimates by the Romanian Association of Visual Communications (ARCA), the switch to digital television signal would have terminated about 170 tv licences. Hence, most local televisions applied for cable licences (twenty out of 50 companies that own 170 television licences for analogic television broadcasting³), which turned the cable operators into major actors of the television market.

Paradoxically, that may be the opportunity of local newspapers to become again the main supplier of local information. More often than not, local newspapers are the only source of local information for people in rural areas or small towns, as central media hardly ever focus on such communities. Television channels with national coverage focus on accidents, murders or other sensationalistic topics.

The interviews have revealed the continuous attempt of authorities and politicians to control the editorial content, which is nothing new. Yet, as opposed to the brutal, aggressive and direct censorship of 2004, now they resort to more subtle and generalized methods.

„As opposed to the media moguls’ era, when some of the media groups (*Vîntu, Patriciu, Voiculescu*) were still independent despite their direct links with politics, since 2009 media channels have been directly controlled politically, by means of proxies that are among their shareholders or who sponsor the respective channels. People like Dan Andronic, Cozmin Gușă, Sebastian Lăzăroiu, Sebastian Ghiță sau Gheorghe Ștefan “Pinalti” have ties with both politics and media ownership” says Iulian Comănescu (*comanescu.ro*).

Media are controlled mostly by means of economic tools and the state institutions are used as repressive bodies. 2015 brought both positive and negative legal changes in this respect.

In June 2015, a Government Emergency Ordinance (OUG 18/2015) amended the Audiovisual Law and introduced a mechanism of support in order to „stimulate the audiovisual economic operators which produce and broadcast information, cultural and education materials of public interest”.

³ <http://www.mediafax.ro/cultura-media/cna-20-de-societati-care-detin-televiziuni-cu-difuzare-terestra-aucerut-alt-tip-de-licente-pentru-a-nu-se-inchide-14176896>

According to OUG 18/2015, the support mechanism amounts to 15 million euro and covers the period from 1 July 2015 – 31 December 2016, that is the electoral year 2016. It is the responsibility of the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) to develop the allocation criteria, which had not happened when we updated the present material (January 2016). As a result, besides suspicions of political interference and some legislative confusion (it is against the law to sponsor information materials), OUG 18/2015 had no other effect whatsoever.

In July 2015 Law no.209/2015 on the cancellation of certain fiscal obligations came into force. The fiscal obligations - as a result of the reconsideration / reclassification of independent activities as dependent activities before June the 1 – were cancelled. The Government admitted that the legislative norms had not been very clear as long as some activities had been wrongly registered as independent. Such flaws allowed the fiscal authority to reclassify retrospectively independent activities (such as journalists' copyright contracts) as dependent, thus calculating higher taxes, plus interests and penalties, which doubled the amount owed by the journalist. Such practices have been often used to intimidate the media. Moreover, with the adoption of the new Fiscal Code, which came into force in January 2016, the classification of an activity as independent is based on much clearer conditions that can be met more easily. However, the taxes have significantly increased so that there is no much difference between independent and dependent activities in terms of labour expenditures.

Direct threats at journalists' life and security have been rare; yet the general crisis, low salaries, sometimes delayed for months, the lack of perspective have led to constant tension that does not endanger journalists' life, but does not secure their survival in the long run either.

Such elements are indicative of a major crisis of the media system. The sector lacks capital, the old business models are no longer operational, the media consumption habits are continuously changing, to the detriment of the „media brands“. The media community is confused. The traditional professional skills are getting more complex, the consumers' direct access to information has become easier, „mass media“ do not belong only to the journalists anymore. With a mobile phone and an Internet connection, anyone can generate content, without any accuracy or ethical constraints. The presidential elections of 2014 (when thousands of citizens living abroad were unable to cast their vote, due to long queues at the voting sections) as well the fire in the *Colectiv* Club in Bucharest, which caused the death of 63 people, - have shown that social media networks react faster, without no – political – constraints whatsoever. Thus they have proved their viability as vehicle of public interest.

Apparently, it is the end of the game, which traditional media seem to have lost. Yet, as always, there is a chance for novelty. In a so badly damaged paradigm, anyone with a progress (and profit) generating idea can win the market and change it as they please. We are not witnessing the extinction of journalism. If the media have a viable economic model, investments will resume. Journalism is not dying, it is changing.

3. Economic vulnerability

„If you have a chronic sustainability issue, any other discussion – including that of professional ethics - is marginal. It is like telling someone who is drowning to swim nicely. „Sir, it is not ok,

you are not swimming very well". But he has to move his hands and legs if he wants to stay afloat". (Alexandru Lăzescu)

3.1 Serious decapitalization of media business

In Romania it is very difficult for the media companies to secure their sustainability and even more difficult to be profitable. The advertising budgets have gone down, so have the newspapers sales. According to Media Fact Book, in 2013 the advertising expenditures for print media amounted to 19 million euro, which is 25% of the 82 million euro in 2008. Users are not willing to pay for the online content. Many media companies have only one source of income. Hence, a chain effect of negative consequences on the independence and quality of the Romanian media. *"It is a vicious circle; the lack of money affects us very strongly. We are unable to employ people; hence we have to work in very small teams, without the possibility to offer training courses to our employees. Journalists have to know everything, which damages the quality and, in my opinion, that is a very serious issue"*, believes Melania Cincea, executive director, *Timpolis*, Timișoara.

Cătălin Moraru is the editor-in-chief of *Monitorul de Botoșani*, one of the few local publications that has managed to survive in times of crisis without dramatically decreasing their sales. *"The media businesses face serious difficulties in every possible way, in distribution, in reaching the media consumers, irrespective of the channel, in finding money – I mean advertising money - to keep the business going. Only 10%-15% of the media are independent, in the best case scenario. All media are dying. It's not that media are not doing fine, they are simply dying"*, Moraru claims.

Romanian media companies are decapitalized. Most of them operate at a loss every year. Local publications that used to make approximately 150000 euro profit in 2008, had constant losses in 2014 and 2015. Central media are not doing much better either; however, some of the companies that own television channels have started to make profit. It is the case of Pro TV SRL, the company that operates the licences *Pro TV, Acasă, Acasă Gold, MTV, Pro Cinema, Sport.ro*, which registered a 19,3 million euro loss in 2013, while in 2014 they had 7,5 million euro profit. Similarly, *Prima Broadcasting*, which operates *Prima TV*, had 9,5 million euro loss in 2013, while in 2014 they registered a 2,3 million euro profit. Noteworthy, both companies gave up the radio stations they owned in 2014. Despite the profit they made in 2014, in August 2015 *Prima TV* filed an insolvency request. *Antena 3 SA* made over 200 000 euro profit, while *Antena TV Group (Antena 1, Antena Stars, Euforia, ZU TV)* registered a 13 million euro loss in 2014. Other companies that operated at a loss were: *Realitatea TV*, with over 18 million euro, *România TV* with almost 2,5 millions euro, or *B1TV* with 900 000 euro, after being one of the few profitable television channels in 2013.⁴

The first and most obvious cause of this financial hemorrhage is **the collapse of the media market as a result of the economic crisis of 2009**. The advertising market reaches now a little

⁴ <http://www.paginademedi.ro/2015/06/bilant-2014-pro-tv-a-intrat-pe-profit-antena-group-pe-pierdere-ce-cifre-de-afaceri-au-avut-anul-trecut-principalele-televiziuni->

over half of what it was in 2008⁵. It is impossible to offer products of the same quality, with only half of the money you used to have, with the prices going up in general and with high labour force expenditures in particular. Paradoxically, such circumstances have affected more the publications whose advertising expenses comfortably represented 65-70% of their overall budget, thus making them less dependent on the variations of the daily sales or the interests of the local leaders.

Ovidiu Vanghele – an investigative journalist – has started his own organization, The Center for Media Investigations. For him, things are clear: „Readers are not willing to support the media, we have lost that category, so we depend on only one source – the economy. The Romanian business environment is seriously distorted, which directly affects the mass media. If the media want to remain honest, they do not bite, because, if they do, the market will not give them money, which is insufficient anyway. If the media do not want to remain honest, they become villain and serve whoever pays them. The exceptions are very rare”.

„Without a collateral business to support their activity, the publications have not managed to survive more than six months – one year. If they succeeded, it was only for one reason: totally unprofessional employees, students with poor professional skills and only one journalist that has to do everything” says Bogdan Brylynski, *Turnul Sfatului*, Sibiu.

„At the moment many media businesses are insolvent, at least unofficially, as they have huge debts to the printing houses, for example” says Cătălin Tolontan, editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Sporturilor*.

Local radio stations share the same situation. Most of them have to cope with financial difficulties, debts to the state and the copyright bodies, etc. They do not have a business plan and only struggle to survive. „National trusts, especially in audiovisual media, make local independent radios bankrupt through unfair competition practices”, says Daniel Dincă, editor-in-chief, *Radio Semnal*, Alexandria.

Advertising agencies work mainly with mainstream media, while advertising reaches local audiences through national networks. Agencies impose advertising fees, which more often than not, are almost unacceptable for local publications. „We work with a few advertising agencies, both for the radio and the newspaper, but the orders are getting smaller, their clients pay less and less and more rarely. The money is not worth it. Sometimes they request 90% discount”, says one of the managers we interviewed.

At the moment, in the best case scenario, the ratio between central and local advertising is 30 / 70%. Local advertising usually comes from the state, through the local authorities, which takes the business to a dangerous area the managers say.

In 2015, the Parliament banned advertising for pharmacies and over the counter drugs. If the law is promulgated, the advertising income of the television stations will decrease significantly

⁵ The advertising market reached 540 million euro in 2008 , and only 306 million euro in 2014, according to <http://www.paginamedia.ro/2014/05/media-fact-book-piata-de-publicitate-estimata-la-306-milioane-de-euro-in-2014/>

as the pharmaceutical industry represents an important share in their budget (about 13% of the advertising market) and comes first in terms of advertising buyers⁶.

In Valea Jiului, there are 3 dailies, 3 tv stations, 2 weeklies and numerous websites. Mass media survive only due to the advertising contracts signed with the local authorities and the money received illegally from politicians, said the interviewees. *„One advertising minute is 18 lei (translator’s note: approx 4 euro) and 1 square centimeter in the newspaper is 1 leu (translator’s note: approx 25 eurocents),”* say the local journalists.

According to many of the interviewees, starting with 2009, even the parties’ advertising budgets have drastically decreased and remained at the lower limit of the previous years. The money is shared among all organizations on the respective market, *„so that nobody gets mad, they pay a little to everybody”* say the journalists in Sălaj. In other cities, for example in Cluj, it is the *„political colour’* of the owner that determines the allocation of the advertising money. *„During this election campaign it was obvious who supported who. You can see that in the stories, the banner which either support only Victor Ponta, or only Klaus Iohannis”,* says one of the journalists we interviewed in Cluj.

No publications or televisions were set up during the 2014 electoral campaign. *„In the past, the number of the new newspapers was telling us the electoral campaign was getting closer. This year we did not see anything new on the market. I believe they have understood that the efficiency was zero and they were wasting their money”,* says Constantin Trofin. Trofin teaches journalism at the Journalism Faculty of the Babes Bolyai University in Cluj, he is also a producer with *Look TV* in Cluj. *„However, mainstream televisions received a breath of fresh air in 2014 or, at least, despite the financial loss, they were not closed down. While no print media outlets emerged, sensationalist websites like Comisarul.ro, Pesurse.ro (with its dissident site Stiripesurse.ro), Obiectiv.info and other, news portals’ mushroomed, very obviously oriented towards a political group or another”,* says Iulian Comănescu.

Distribution is another major issue that print media currently have to cope with. Things are particularly difficult for the local media, which often remains the only source of information of public interest for the people living in small towns or villages. If local newspapers disappeared, the audience would stick to national radio and tv networks, most of them focused on entertainment and sensationalism.

Initially direct kiosk sales made up for the lack of advertising, but eventually the crisis and political pressures showed their effects. Out of about 5000 news kiosks all over the country in 2008 only 3000 are left today and only about 2000 sell media daily, says Cătălin Tolontan.

“It is very difficult to find people willing to sell at the kiosks, or ambulant vendors. That’s why I had to close down some kiosks, or have them work less” Cătălin Moraru describes the attempts of *Monitorul de Botosani* at developing its own distribution network. For such jobs media managers can only offer low salaries, which are not motivating at all. “ We are often told that for that money (ed.note 800 lei, less than 200 euro) one would rather stay at home and live on welfare” Moraru concludes. The situation is the same all over Romania. “We have very few

⁶<http://www.paginademedia.ro/2015/12/senatul-a-adoptat-interzicerea-publicitatii-pentru-medicamente-la-radio-si-televiziune-legea-merge-la-promulgare>

ambulant vendors, about 10. On top of everything, in a town with a high unemployment rate, Galați comes third in terms of unemployment, we can't find anyone willing to work". (Anca Spânu, deputy editor-in-chief, *Viața Liberă*, Galați)

Conflicts between media institutions and local authorities affect distribution, too. „*One of the distribution company in Craiova was closed down by the mayor because they were selling Gazeta de Sud in the city center. The kiosks were taken away despite protests from several NGOs active nationally*”, says Stefan Voinea, director, *Gazeta de Sud*.

Media businesses that do not own selling kiosks face distribution problems too. „*The first three distribution companies became insolvent in a period of 2 years. As a result, the publications lost a lot of money. Unconventional selling in gas stations or shopping centers did not solve the problem, as people do not usually get their daily information in such places*” says Tolontan. Moreover, in most cases the fees are huge for the local publications.

It is the subscriptions that help traditional newspapers survive on the market. *Monitorul de Botoșani* has about 4000 subscribers and a circulation of about 5200 copies. *Gazeta de Sud* sells 11 500 copies daily, of which 8000 are subscriptions, while *România liberă* sells about 14 500 copies and has 4500 subscriptions.

„*Carrefour rips you off, the Post requests 30% commission. Subscriptions become unprofitable*” says one of the managers we interviewed in Sibiu. „*There's no place to sell our newspaper in Sibiu. That is a serious matter*” says Bogdan Brylynski. According to the interviewees, in Sibiu the news kiosks were removed for aesthetic reasons. The rehabilitation of the old city center requested news kiosks that would match the city architecture. The new kiosks, which met the requirements, were very expensive, unaffordable for the editors in the city.

We found the same situation in Galați. „*Distribution outside the city of residence has become unaffordable. Due to the fees of the Romanian Post you earn almost nothing from newspaper distribution in the rural areas, therefore you have two options: you either increase the subscription fee – in our case it is cheaper in the rural areas, to encourage people to read and be informed, or reduce the distribution area. You don't reach places which are more than 100 km far from the city of residence*” Anca Spânu believes.

Local televisions find it difficult to reach their public either. 'Recently I've been through the licensing procedure of National Broadcast Council in order to obtain a licence for a local television – Alege TV. The application was rejected twice, without any explanation. Eventually we got the licence', says Ștefan Voinea.

Local televisions also accuse the cable operators monopoly, which often makes it almost impossible for them to enter the cable transmitting system. For example, one local television station had to sue the cable operator in order to be included in the retransmission package. Satu Mare is not unique, the same problem has been identified in several other cities.

Interviewees frequently criticised the National Broadcast Council. „*CNA issues licences arbitrarily*” says Hannelore Acârnușei Petrovai, manager of *hunedoaramea.ro*. „*I know a*

journalist with over 20-year expertise in television, who has opened and managed many local televisions, whose licence has been rejected due to his lack of experience.”

The dissolution of the traditional media business model represents the second systemic and global cause. The Internet, the dominance of online platforms have changed the rules of the game, the media consumption habits of the public and disturbed the industry’s capital flows. All over the world media are still seeking solutions for their economic sustainability under the new technological circumstances, with little and isolated success, apparently impossible to replicate somewhere else.

„We do not have enough readers, that is our main problem as a print publication. The online, like everywhere in the world, has captured part of them. We are struggling to survive considering two new print titles have appeared on the local market, not to mention about 10 news website, two tv channels, which divide the target audience”, says Ana Maria Flore, editor-in-chief of Aradul newspaper.

According to Stefan Voinea, the fast decline of the traditional media consumption, in favor of the Internet, as well as the lack of model for the digital switchover of the small and medium sized media outlets – are the two main media problems. *„The Internet has cut the link between advertising and journalistic content and the advertising clients do not have to communicate with the target audience, most of the market belongs to the global players- Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Microsoft”* Voinea says.

According to Media Fact Book, in 2014 the online advertising market was estimated at 50 million euro, of which less than 40% is represented by display advertising.⁷ Online advertising is extremely cheap. According to managers, online advertising brings between 1000 and 3500 euro monthly to a local daily, a market leader in the community.

*A third – this time local – cause is **the lack of professional management skills of most media owners in Romania**. The lack of interest, of vision or management skills made most of the Romanian media reactive and focused on minimizing the damages, instead of building medium and long time development strategies.*

In Sibiu, the managers gathered to discuss business models. *„We met and discussed distribution, public money. But that was all. It cannot work, because you are in competition with those around the table. Media outlets go where the money is. The market is small, too many conflicts and too much pride. One cannot talk about associations when there are conflicts and there is much pride”* says Cristiana Fota, manager of the online newspaper *Știri de Sibiu*. Brylynski shares the same conclusion: *„Romanian media is no longer a real business. We cannot afford to make any strategies. The managers meeting remind of foxes that have gathered to steal ideas. If one is naive enough to mention the name of a certain company, for sure the next day 10 sales agents will knock at their door.”*

⁷ advertising that utilizes online banners

3.2. Labour cost

„There is a huge difference between the distribution, advertising and classifieds income and expenses.” (Manager in Alba Iulia)

To cope with the increasing pressures caused by the decreasing income, the media companies have been trying to reduce the expenditures. As labour costs are among the highest, there have been constant attempts at reducing them. The number of staff was reduced, the salaries decreased (*see also Chapter 5 Lack of staff and professionalism in newsrooms*). Another way to reduce labour costs, was to abandon unlimited term employment contracts in favour of other employment contracts: copyright contracts (for the total or partial payment), service contracts, which made journalists registered as self-employed.

Such alternative employment forms have brought the immediate advantage of paying lower taxes to the state. For example, before 2010, copyright contracts requested only taxes for the journalist, while the media outlet was obliged to retain only 10%. So no costs related to health, retirement or social security were paid by the employer or the employee. At first, the copyright contracts – sometimes optional, sometimes compulsory – brought a higher income to the employees; however, they lost the social security and health benefits. The journalists also lost the protection against being fired at the owners’ discretion.

In 2011 the Fiscal Code introduced retirement and health care taxes in case of copyright contracts, both for the employer and the employee. It was a consequence of the possibility to reclassify any independent activity as dependent, with the obligation to retroactively calculate the compulsory social contributions.

“If you want to obey the law and pay all taxes, you have to maintain the salaries at a very low level. Otherwise, you can’t afford it. We used to get meal vouchers. I have just learned that now we have to pay taxes for them. We’ll see if we can afford them any more”, says one of the journalists with management responsibilities in a local newsroom.

The ambiguous labour relations between employer and employee directly determine the vulnerability of the latter, who no longer enjoys the job stability, constant income or social protection.

„Journalists often work on copyright contracts. Many have just graduated, they just want some money, do not worry about the type of contract they signed. Many do not know the difference between an employment and copyright contract” says Cătălin Hopulele, a journalist with *Ziarul de Iași*.

Short term employment contracts are also used. Thus, the owners make sure the journalists play by the rule, otherwise their contracts will not be renewed.

„The lack of contract makes you vulnerable, there are people who work illegally and have no means to protes if they are fired”, which really happens. *„A journalist published an investigation in Ziuă de Cluj newspaper, related to the lack of a bidding process at the airport. Immediately*

bidding procedures were initiated. The information was available 2 hours on the website, then the journalist was fired". (a journalist in Cluj).

According to Constantin Trofin, there is another problem besides the journalists' vulnerability: „Considering that the journalist is a product of the system, the constant law infringements as well as tax evasion can influence the journalist's way of thinking when covering such topics." Hence a journalist who works in the grey or black economy will have less interest or courage to expose law infringements.

Yet managers say it is the Romanian legislation that makes them choose alternative solutions and put the blame on the difficulties generated by the Fiscal and the Labour Codes, which do not consider labour without working time norms, typical of newsrooms. They claim that if they observed the legislation *ad litteram* honest media businesses would completely disappear. „In Romania labour costs are high compared to the income; if one has to pay extra hours, to have time sheets, then one simply has to close down and go home. There is no way one could afford such expenses. They are extremely high". (the manager of a local daily)

According to the Fiscal Code, fiscal authorities can decide to reclassify certain independent activities as dependent, following investigations. Then the media organizations have to pay the due taxes retrospectively, plus the penalties. Moreover, media outlets can be accused of tax evasion, which is a criminal offence. Such uncertainty makes media businesses vulnerable.

CME – the company that owns *Pro TV*, among other media operations – represents the most recent case in this respect. According to Hotnews⁸, CME admitted that „some of our branches in Romania are currently under the investigation of the Romanian fiscal authorities. (...) Such investigations target several issues, income taxes and VAT issues included. During the investigation of *Pro TV*, the authorities are especially checking the relationships between *Pro TV* and a service company, which resulted in a large number of people who worked for *Pro TV* without a labour contract during the period investigated by the audit. The fiscal authorities are checking if that staff was independent enough from *Pro TV*. If the audit decides that the employees activity was not independent and they should have been considered as regular employees, then their payments should be considered salaries. (...) *Pro TV* would be responsible for any unpaid taxes, penalties and interests".

Such situations are also typical of the local media, where such a reclassification of ‚dependent' activities would result in the payment of amounts that could easily bankrupt smaller companies.

Larger companies do not feel very comfortable either, as they see such a reclassification as potentially arbitrary, more like a punishment. According to one of our interviewees, some media and advertising companies have reconsidered their copyright contracts for fear that „they may have to pay taxes retrospectively". Since the budgets have stayed the same, switching to labour contracts had a negative impact on the number of employees, which has decreased accordingly.

⁸ http://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-20041797-pro-venituri-22-3-milioane-din-publicitate-10-3-milioane-cablisti-primul-trimestru-cme-piata-publicitate-crescut-7-romania.htm

Whatever the alternative, it is the journalist that is always the loser and remains unprotected. The manager is equally disadvantaged, as he is trying to play by the rule and thus he loses, compared to those who choose to disobey the law and escape the state control – accidentally or because they enjoy protection or political influence.

The „fiscal amnesty” adopted in July 2015 excluded the possibility of reclassifying the independent activities for 2015-2016. The Fiscal Code, which came into force in January 2016, introduces seven criteria that define an independent activity. If at least four of them are met, then an activity can be considered independent. The Fiscal Code also stipulates the taxes to be paid by those who supply independent activities. Moreover, local taxes for residences registered as company headquarters can go up by 800%.

Conclusions

Constantin Trofin believes that the economic problems badly affect the independence of the mass media operations. „ *If you do not have an independent economic mechanism to back you up, you depend on the ridiculous amount you get from shop round the corner and you cannot say they sell stale sandwiches. That is the level of the local media, they depend on one hundred euro from you name it to pay their electricity bill*”.

„*Advertising suppliers end up influencing the editorial content. There is no freedom of expression without advertising. When you do not have enough, you cannot stand on your own feet and, consequently, you sometimes have to consider that, whether you like it or not. Sometimes it is about self censorship*” says one of the editors-in-chief we interviewed.

Due to the environment in which media operate, many honest media owners had to close down their businesses and many journalists have abandoned their professions. Apparently, under the current circumstances, it is impossible to make profit or to make a decent living on honest journalism.

Most of the interviewees with managerial responsibilities as well as some of the reporters identified economic vulnerability as the main issue affecting the media. To cope with this challenge, most of our interviewees claim they have developed „survival strategies”.

BOX

In short:

- Romanian media companies badly lack capital. Most of them operate at a loss every year.
- The business environment is profoundly distorted, which badly affects the media
- The relationship with advertising is distorted: agencies impose high discounts, there are huge disparities between local and national advertising. Local advertising is politically influenced.
- Print media distribution is difficult: direct kiosk sales are decreasing; selling networks – for example, selling via Romanian Post or in shopping malls – are extremely expensive for media owners;

- Distribution of tv programmes is difficult: cable operators act as "gatekeepers"; the switch to digital television, scheduled for 17 June 2015, has been postponed; local televisions have sought 'refuge' on cable.
- Most local radio stations experience economic difficulties (they owe money to the state or the bodies managing copyrights)
- Advertising suppliers control the editorial content
- Managers - more or less - accept compromise in order to stay in business
- Many media outlets have abandoned unlimited term employment contracts in favour of alternative types of employment: copyright contracts (for the whole or part of the activity), or service agreements which made journalists register as self-employed.
- The ambiguous relationship employer-employee directly makes the journalists vulnerable: they do not enjoy job stability, constant income and social protection
- Under the Fiscal Code, authorities could decide, following their audits, that independent activities be reclassified as dependent, which is no longer possible following the legislative changes of June 2015

4. Media agenda confiscated by interests other than editorial

„If you are a media owner, you have to accept compromises if you want to keep your newspaper alive. You only survive. There are no perspectives. Before, you could see a lifebelt. Not anymore. You only swim and try to see how long you can move your legs”. (Cătălin Hopulele, journalist)

Negotiating the editorial agenda is probably the most frequent compromise media outlets have to accept. Thus media agenda ends up covering mostly the not always illegal – political or economic - interests of various groups, to the detriment of the public interest – that media are obliged to serve. „Private and public outlets have connected the media to a feed of conferences and meetings. „*Currently, the public agenda is no longer similar to the public interest and is dictated by conferences, and not by journalists’ will*” thinks Iulian Comanescu (comanescu.ro). To serve the income generating interests, journalists abandon – or are forced to abandon – the professional standards (neutrality, balance).

Romania – like Italy, Spain and France – belongs to the southern media system, characterized by ‘parallelism’: ‘traditionally’ politics and media overlap and support each other. The feeble culture of media independence in Romania, just emerging after 1990, was weakened by the brutal government control over the media in 2004 - 2008. After enjoying relative freedom (2005-2006), media voluntarily joined political and economic factions, thus strengthening the polarization of the society. Meanwhile, media no longer act as an observer, they have turned first into vehicles of the political fight, then they became allies and, ultimately, combatants.

Iulian Comănescu believes that *“paradoxically, the editorial independence is only possible for the commercial media (private generalist TV channels, dailies, tabloids), which do not have too much political content of public interest. The former "quality" media have become a tool of the political actors”*.

Thus media have become an influential rather than information means and opinion leaders. The trend is so obvious that the public opinion do not perceive journalists as working „for a media outlet”, but as working „for someone’ whose agenda they unconditionally serve.

Politicians bought media businesses, thus confiscating the media in a very unsophisticated way. According to a study produced by Active Watch in 2014, about 40% of the televisions had political ties because of their owners or managers. „Politicians want to own media. They still have the idea that if you do not have your own television, newspaper or at least your own website, you are not a politician”. (a journalist from Satu Mare)

The opposite movement has also become visible lately: politicians abandoning or closing down their media businesses, as an indication of the fact that media are no longer relevant for them and that they have other murky ways, beyond public scrutiny, to exert their influence on the voters. *„Such politicians have lost their power lately. They no longer win. Their messages are inefficient or almost inefficient, but, unfortunately, they have spoiled the newsrooms. They act unequivocally – if you support me, you are ok, if you are against me, you are my enemy”* says Cristian Lupașcu, president of the County Association of the Professional Journalists in Botoșani. *“Politicians have subordinated the media, turning some media brands, which used to be successful several years ago, into propaganda tools, which resulted in circulation loss. Such brands became only political useless trumpets for the same politicians. After buying the press, they destroyed it”* says Comănescu.

Romanian media today operate ‘upward’; their message targets the decision makers instead of informing the public, which is rhetorically invoked by the journalists, yet neglected by the way they practice their profession.

At the moment, broadly speaking there are three categories of media institutions. The first category includes the media outlets whose owners have other businesses or political connections that keep the media business alive. „In such cases, media become part of a subliminal persuasive mechanism, which brings business advantages, so having a media business is a price you have to pay. You have no interest in journalism as such. In the best case scenario, it is not dangerous”, says Alexandru Lăzescu. *„Other newsrooms are totally subordinated to their owner who also makes the editorial decision. He is everything. And all the others support him”*. (Constantin Trofin, Cluj)

The second category includes media operations that function as a blackmailing mechanism. *„The professionals of media blackmail do not necessarily rely on publishing the information, they may just inform you that if you do not pay, they will publish it. And the material is sent to all institutions that can make your life miserable: the Financial Guard, fiscal authorities, the Parliament, etc. Sometimes it is rubbish, sometimes there are investigations that matter. Everyone is afraid of this kind of business,”* Lăzescu added.

“We embark on an unequal fight. The money is directed to media outlets which belong to the power, through the businessmen which support the power. And they do not support it unconditionally, they request contracts with the state instead or protection for their shady businesses. We are trying to survive and cannot stay on the battlefield 24 hours a day. We have four people, they have twelve that do the work of 3-4 people and have much higher salaries. They write what they are told, they have been accused of blackmail publicly, sometime even by the authorities”, says one of the managers we interviewed.

The third category includes the newsrooms that try to stay as decent as possible, but cannot survive without small compromises. They do what they are told but, at the same time, try to criticize. However, they sometimes have to soften their voice.

According to Alina Mătiș, an editor with *Gândul.info*⁹, *the owners represent one of the most serious issues of the Romanian media. „Very often, media trusts or products are – directly or indirectly – in the hands of politicians that use the journalists for their own agenda. Despite the exceptions, we cannot talk about independent media in Romania. The journalistic product reflected the fact that many media outlets lived on political money, especially in the electoral year 2014”.*

In many towns the media are only a PR extension of the public institutions. In most cases, based on their political preferences, media owners subordinate the editorial policy to the public institutions or political parties. That is the case of Alexandria, too. Daniel Dincă says *„[Media outlets] depend on the owners money, which leads to latter’s influence on the editorial policy. Deliberately, the owner only gives enough survival money so that journalists cannot do their job professionally”*

„There is a vicious circle. The state is the biggest business partner. The state is led by politicians. Politicians have a say in the big business. Small business depend on big business. So, whatever you do, you cannot escape. If you publish something negative, the very next moment you lose your advertising money, so there is a lot of irrelevant stuff and there are almost no investigations” says Alexandru Cristorian, an investigative journalist, owner of the online publication *abcnews.ro*, in Alba Iulia. He has chosen not to accept any money from the local public authorities.

„Since 2012 we have encountered the practices of 2000-2004. Businessmen who had worked with us, refused to extend their contracts or even to answer our phone calls as soon as the power changed”, a manager told us. *„In 2000 - 2004 they explained to us they had been under pressure, threatened, investigated and therefore they could not afford to give us money, thus sending the message they supported a newspaper which is critical of the power. Then they would give up their advertising. This time we have not received any explanation”.* This is not a unique case. *„We have constantly been told that we do not receive advertising because that would make them visible and the fiscal authorities would check their business. They tell us «we do not want any advertising, it will only hurt us. The mayor will call us and say „What are you doing?” Are you supporting my enemies”?*, told us the manager of a publication located in an area influenced by a famous local businessman („baron”).

A 2014 CIJ report¹⁰ prepared with the help of OLAF, showed that the public money advertising market was going up in Romania, from about 150 million lei (approximately 35 million euro) in 2011 to over 338 million lei (approximately 76 million euro) in 2013. Noteworthy that only part of the public procurement procedures have been identified. Thus, in 2013 contracts worth of 31,5 million euro were allocated, which turns EU into one of the main investors on the

⁹ Statement for the research „Media Sustainability Index”, December 2014.

¹⁰ The report MONITORING THE PUBLICITY BUDGETS OF THE EU-FUNDED PROJECTS is available at: http://www.cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Monitorizarea-Cheltuielilor-din-Fondurile-Europene_ENG.pdf

Romanian advertising market. Considering the procedures that have been annulled or have not been completed, the budget for public money advertising represent the double amount of the most active industry in terms of advertising: 76 million euro (public money) compared to 38 million euro spent by cosmetics / hygiene industry. Hence, the public money advertising represent about 20% - 25% of the public Romanian advertising market. According to the CIJ study, most public budgets for advertising have been allocated following less transparent procedures – direct buy or the lowest price criterion.

Non-transparent and unprofessional allocation of such budgets can result in serious distortions of the media market. *„The advertising clients do not require any rating as long as they give the money to the newspaper or television that belongs to the chief of the party”* (Hannelore Petrovai). According to our interviewees, when it comes to public money for advertising, the contracts are split so that the amounts fall under the legal threshold of 30 000 euro, which require public procurement procedures. *„BRAT has often been irrelevant. The allocation of advertising budgets is based on non-transparent criteria, on political friendship and not on performance”*, says one of the managers in Oradea.

The first draft of the Public Procurement Law, under public debate in July 2015, completely removed any provisions regarding the transparency of advertising contracts on public money, as well as the stipulation that any procurement file was a public document. Following the public debate, the draft law has not been sent to the Parliament so far (January 2016).

Are there contracts that include non-aggression clauses? *„Yes, and they are more and more frequent and come from private businesses. We also had such contracts from the state but we made ourselves very clear: we would never accept such contracts and the state authorities understood. But such contracts keep coming from the private businesses and our marketing director is trying to make them understand that we would never invent negative things, because in most of the cases they come to tell us not to write rubbish about them”*, says Cătalin Moraru.

There are happy cases when the publications’ power is stronger than the pressures exerted on it. *„We have no competition in Satu Mare. We can lose a contract if we write bad things, but they will come back to us because they have no choice”*, says Dumitru Păcuraru, director of the *Informația Zilei* daily. So is the case in Botoșani.

4.1 Censorship, self-censorship, ethics

Journalism that takes sides or militant journalism – that seems to be the current issue. Most interviewees admit they know that certain topics and people are taboo. They differ from newsroom to newsroom and it is the editors-in-chief that decide what the journalist should cover, based on the indications they receive from those who pay. In most cases the people that pay supply the necessary ‘ammunition’, too.

‘The journalists’ opportunism and their availability to serve have reached incredible levels. They are ready to serve their master, who may be the owner, or the party, the sponsor, wherever he may be. Journalists are ready to subdue, to abandon the professional standards and principles and to join one group or another, or even to start a war with the opposite group. In other words, media look like the despicable world of politics, which is comprised of gangs, has little to do with

ideology, and which has annexed the media that serves the fight among gangs. Of course, first of all this battle is about resources. He who grabs the resources survives! Media have largely become an annex to all that” believes Brândușa Armanca. “It is incredible how pseudo-subjects emerge spontaneously on totally different media channels. The pseudo-subjects represent pseudo-information supplied by sources, scenarios for the future, false exposures – everything but no news/solid investigations; they target the political opponents of those who control the respective media channels”, Iulian Comănescu added.

Some of the interviewees admit they censor themselves because they know their newsrooms would never publish certain materials, so they do not document them anyway. In their opinion, online journalism may be a solution that would allow them to practice journalism as they please. *„There are instances when we are not free to express ourselves, but anyway we have more freedom online than in print. A sensitive subject has more chances to be pushed online”* (a journalist from Alba Iulia)

Yet a dangerous phenomenon occurs: journalists assume selfcensorship, which becomes something „normal”. *„If a political party advertises in my newspaper, it is normal to censor myself. That is self-understood, as no contract would include a clause which says „be careful what you write from now on or on the duration of our contract”. (...) You will be surprised, but I think that somehow it is normal that as long as I have advertising from Carrefour, I should not write that they sell stale meat”* confessed a journalist from Oradea.

Other journalists confirmed the existence of taboo topics in the newsrooms, but it depends on how serious the topic is. *„ If it is something serious, it will be published. If not, it will certainly not be published”*, said a journalist from Iași.

Professional ethics is considered obsolete by some of those who work as journalists. Those who try to keep the professional standards are ridiculed as ‘deontologists’. *“Many of my colleagues say ‘I do not care for whom I write or what I write, I am only interested to get my money’, we know that is wrong, but do not react. And that hurts our profession”* says a journalist from Brașov.

All the interviewees told us they were aware or personally knew journalists that disobey ethical standards. *“If you go to the minister now, to the PSD (translator’s note: the Social Democrat Party), you will see a room full of people who – apparently – are media people but tomorrow there will no coverage in the media. They are former journalists that come by, to catch a penny dropped by the party, to be cheerleaders, it is embarrassing”* says Liliana Spoeală, a journalist from Brăila. *“When there is an opening, there are 100 people, you do not know where they come from, because you only see them once or twice a year”* told us another local journalist.

Almost all of them recall stories that have become famous. *“There is journalist around here who went to the mayor and asked him to give her money for tiles, because she needed tiles for her house. Of course, the mayor despises all of us”* (a journalist from the local media)

„It is the politicians that need journalists the most, and if they cannot buy the newspaper or the managers of the publication, if they do not have money for advertising, then they try to corrupt your men. When you work with a reporter for a long time, you know that. You react, talk, the relationships worsen. Our job description says journalists are not allowed to offer consultancy to politicians, there are limits that we value. But nothing is ever sterile” says one of the local

managers. „They bought people in our newsroom and that was the worst part, the dirtiest tactics. It is a small county, there is no one to replace the journalists. Sometimes you turn a blind eye, you tell them to take it easy because there is something fishy in the item of news. We even fired people, when we could afford that, because we could not stand the situation any longer” (a local manager). The close links between journalists and politicians are especially obvious during election campaigns. „ Some of my colleagues made newspapers for politicians during this campaign. It is not ok, but it is about money and, very often, that is the only thing that matters” another journalist from Târgu Mureş said.

Journalists are poor and that makes them vulnerable. „*For their sources, journalists have become a sort of weapon that helps them solve their problems. For a meal out, the journalist will attack your opponent and you can fix the problem*” recalls a former journalist, currently a political consultant in a small town. „They used to be more expensive, but suddenly they became very cheap, as cheap as a full tank, something like that”.

Other journalists are more direct. They are the ‚talibans’, sometimes respected, other times envied or despised by their colleagues. „ *Imagine a doctor that would operate on children, but 1 in three children would die. And he says: I’ll continue to work as a doctor, because I have a child at home and I need money to raise him. Media are so badly paid that it is not worth making compromises. You’d better be a bartender. You make more money. It is the feeling that you do something and that you matter that keeps you in this profession*” (Alexandu Cristorian, abcnews.ro, Alba Iulia)

4.2 Using state institutions as a weapon against unfriendly media

The interviews have revealed a trend typical of the media in the early 2000s: state institutions are used as tools to coerce or exert pressure on the media.

„*Besides economic issues, there is political pressure. We have faced such threats: ok, you write about us, we appoint the director of the fiscal authority, let’s schedule a control. Such a control, of the Fiscal authority, the Labour Inspection, will paralyze the whole activity in a newsroom. We’ve been through that before*” says one of the managers we interviewed. His story is backed up by journalists and managers in several regions of the country.

Obviously state control is legal and justified. But there is a problem when only certain media institutions are subject to frequent and long investigations, which hamper their activity.

„*We operate on a market whose rules are not the same for everybody and that is the most serious problem. If you disturb someone, they investigate you. Have you written about a deputy who knows the director of the local Labour Inspectorate? The control starts the following day. In my case, first of all they wanted to see the time sheets. The labour code, as it is now, does not stipulate that journalism is a profession without working norms. The code is made for those who work in a factory, 8 hours a day. And there is no way you can get away without a fine. Last time the fiscal authorities investigated us for three months and a half*”, Cătălin Moraru explains.

Many managers have accused the state of an unprofitable approach both for the state budget and the public interest: debts to the state budget, that pile up for years, thus making the media outlets obedient. In time such a situation has led to unfair competition among media

institutions. Media organization that were unable to pay their contributions to the state budget could not develop, they could not even survive, to the detriment of the of the ,good payers’.

We have witnessed astonishing insolvency cases lately. The companies that publish Adevărul, Evenimentul Zilei, Jurnalul Național have filed for insolvency since 2012. Mediafax Group SA (Gandul.info, agenția Mediafax, Ziarul financiar, etc) also filed for insolvency in November 2014. Most insolvent companies have debts to the state budget, among other creditors. In 2015, Intact Publishins, PubliOne and Prima Tv added to the insolvent media companies, together with other tens of local media companies. The insolvency trial of Realitatea TV, which started in 2011, has reached its 53 term in court without any solution.¹¹

„There are companies that are deliberately allowed to reach a high debt level, while others are immediately fined and if they owe 1 leu to the state, their accounts are blocked. Decisions are made according to the power certain institutions have, so that they can be investigated later on. The law is not the same for all’, said one of the managers from Bucharest.

Conclusions

The fiscal legislation has repeatedly changed in the past years; it also changed in 2015 and 2016. We need legislative stability and clear labour legislation and fiscal policies. Interpretations vary: different institutions or local branches of the same institutions offer various interpretations of the law. That makes both journalists and industry vulnerable in their relationship with the state institutions, which can apply the law differently, depending on their connections with the media owners.

Media community should also restore their professional standards and strengthen the capacity to react to media transgressions. The journalists’ lack of reaction endanger professional standards and conveys the idea that bad journalism is the „norm”

Box:

In short:

- The public agenda is dictated by non-editorial factors and no longer coincides with the public interest.
- Media have become means of influence, rather than vectors of information and opinion leaders, journalists completely embrace their owners’ agenda and are no longer perceived as working ,somewhere’, but working for ,someone’.
- Very often the media trusts or products – are –directly or not – in the hands of politicians, who use journalists to promote their own agenda.
- The opposite trend has also become visible lately: politicians are closing down their media operations, which means media are no longer relevant for them.
- Local media are only an extension of the PR office of the local public institutions.

¹¹ <http://m.b1.ro/stiri/eveniment/noul-termen-in-procesul-de-insolventa-al-realitatii-tv-a-fost-amanat-pentru-4-noiembrie-televisiunea-a-acumulat-datorii-la-bugetul-de-stat-de- peste-22-de-milioane-de-euro-115714.html>

- Non-transparent and unprofessional allocation of the public money for advertising can badly distort the media market
- Journalism that take sides or militant journalism is a serious issue for the media.
- Some journalists admit they censor themselves because they know their newsrooms will never publish certain materials. Journalists assume censorship, which has become normal.
- Some journalists consider professional ethics obsolete.
- State institutions are used as means to coerce or put pressure on the media.

5. Depopulation and deprofessionalization

„To have quality media one needs sustainable business, as well as people who do not accept anything”. (Alexandru Lăzescu)

Less and less employess and lower salaries, alternative methods aimed at minimizing the costs have led to the **deprofessionalization** and **depopulation of the newsrooms**.

5.1 Depopulation of the newsrooms

According to the Romanian Federation of Journalists, in 2004, 22000 people worked in the media industry with a labour contract. In 2010, 6000 jobs had disappeared. Some newsrooms have only one tenth of the labour force they had eight years ago. In 2013, the Romanian Television fired 636 employees as part of their strategy of economic sustainability.

„Why are the media in such a mess? If you do not have enough money, you can't pay high salaries. That goes for honest people. The others do not need professionalism, because they no longer practice journalism, they are the media arm of a political, business entity”, said Ovidiu Vanghele.

Many newsrooms have closed down. Others have shrunk beyond the limit that allows them to function properly. *„Most televisions closed down. Some televisions are a disgrace. Some newspaper function with one or two people that practice Google journalism or office journalism”* said one of the journalists interviewed in Cluj.

„The current practices of the online journalists are limited to copy/paste information from foreign sources and to publish it without indicating the source. In 2012, 9% of the online journalism in Romania followed this pattern”, said Natalia Milevschi, a lecturer at the Journalism and Communication Sciences Faculty (FJSC)

„Supporting jobs’ were abandoned first – text editors or designers. The number of journalists decreased by 40%; at the moment some newsrooms have only 3-4 employees that do everything.

The decrease of the staff resulted in reduced attention and capacity to cover the topics, especially those that define the watchdog role of the media. *„You can no longer cover the*

subjects the way you could do it when there were specialized people in the newsrooms. Now there is only one person that has to cover 4-5 institutions. There are less people in the field, that is the real challenge. It is this category that was mostly affected” (Alexandru Lăzescu, Ziarul de Iași)

„Newspapers do not preserve their old social, political, economic structure; now people have to do everything, only the colleagues in the sports department are exempted, we have to do everything. You can’t know everything, the quality is going down” says Orlando Toader, a journalist in Arad.

Other publications in Arad share the same situations: „Less people and more work. Longer working hours for the same salary, people want to work less, there is less enthusiasm. And that shows in the printed page, because when you lack enthusiasm, material and moral support, you have no interest. That influences the sales, the advertising we sell in our news bulletins and programs and it is not a pink picture at all”, says one of the editors-in-chief.

More numerous tasks for journalists add to the volume of work. Most journalists have to produce online materials too, to take photos, to shoot, edit and upload and promote the materials on the website. „It’s a one-man band. We have to be multifunctional reporters: text, video, documentation. We receive cameras, but we take photos with our personal phones. There is only one photojournalist” says Dana Chiru, an economic journalist with Evenimentul in Iași.

„People are no longer specialised, the specialists in certain fields have completely disappeared. There used to be competition among journalists in certain specialties. Now for some of them there are no journalists at all. We are understaffed” says Sidonia Bogdan. „In my opinion, covering foreign news is a serious issue. For example, the conflict in Ukraine was neglected for a long time and the first media coverage actually offered only translations from the Russian media or materials from the media in the Republic of Moldova” (Natalia Milevschi, FJSC)

On one hand, journalists claim they accept compromises because they have no alternative. „The market has shrunk and I believe journalists behave themselves to keep their jobs, which is not ok. And if you talk to them, the future is not promising. A lot of them would like to do something else” says Vasile Hotea Fernezan, a journalist with TVR Cluj.

„They are afraid they may lose their job, and don’t know what they’ll do tomorrow. If I leave this place, there is no place to go, it’s a small town, no much media and one needs a job. We meet at conferences and cry on each other’s shoulders” (a journalist in Alexandria)

At the same time, managers complain it is difficult to find journalists: „We had a contest, 40 people for 4 positions. They took a test in Romanian with catastrophic results. They had graduated the Philology faculty with A, but their grammar was incredibly bad. We could hardly choose four people, only one journalism graduate among them, with good grammar, still learning to write a piece of news”. (a journalist in Alba Iulia)

„There are less people in the newsrooms, half of what it used to be. 70%-80% are almost irreplaceable and they know that. They have more tasks, they have to work for the website, too, for the newspaper, which, once again, has a negative effect of the journalism quality (...) It is extremely difficult to train someone. You get tired of that”, Moraru says.

5.2 Deprofessionalization

There is no interest on the market for the journalists' professional training. *„A journalist's life duration in a newsroom has dramatically decreased, it does not exceed 2-3 years. One seldom sees journalists over 30, if that happens journalists work in the office. The young ones come and leave in maximum 3 – 4 years. There is no need for training, because there's no one to train. You know that people come, you struggle with them, and when they begin to understand what to do, they leave. And there is nothing you can do. You can't raise their salary, you can't even sign a labour contract for an unlimited period of time”* (Teo Tița, Bucharest)

„There are currently two trends in the media. There are the people with no money, therefore unable to bring good professionals or pay for their training; and there are the people without any interest in hiring good professionals because they don't actually need journalists; they just need people that do whatever they are asked to do”, Ovidiu Vanghele believes.

As far as the training is concerned, the interviewees identify another problem resulting from the work the remaining staff still needs to do. *„In case you leave for three or four days, you bring the activity to a standstill because there are few people left. The work they are supposed to do is far too much for them, and you risk to bring them at the verge of a breakdown. You have to protect them somehow”* says Melania Cincea, director of *Timpolis*, Timișoara.

The declining skills may also come from the fact that editors can no longer invest in documentation. Salaries remain the only cost they can afford. There is no money for travel expenses or database access. *“When you want to check something in the Registry of Commerce, you need to pay a fee. There are lots of editors – most of them, I believe – which cannot afford it, so they check no more”,* Anca Spanu says.

Journalists are under pressure too often. They should have a car, their own camera or videocamera in order to get a job. They should afford to cover the travel expenses on their own in case they want to get deeper into a case. Therefore they honour the invitation they receive from governmental or non-governmental organisations or companies in order to get to places of any potential journalistic interest while watering down editorial independence.

5.3 Too often journalists are paid below the minimum wage on economy

„Newsrooms currently operate like a neighbourhood restaurant. Sometimes we need to change the waiters in order to keep their pay and fame low.” (Constantin Trofin)

Journalists believe that poor wages and lack of professional stability are some of the most serious challenges they face. *„You just look around and you will realise that things are bad all over the media. Things are even worse in television – channels appear and disappear, journalists moving from one to another, and this depends on who pays better or – lately - just pays”,* a journalist in Targu Mures said.

„Salaries in the media are extremely low; in some cases, graduate journalists are paid the minimum wage on economy. This is one of the reasons why older journalists quit or keep working as a hobby while earning their living somewhere else”, Hannelore Petroval says. „Many of those currently working in the media are good children who feel that they should quit after having reached some professional level if their expectations were higher. And they leave a roged local system for a roged national system where the pay is somewhat better”, Constantin Trofin adds. „Most of the times, it is the skilled professionals who quit. Skilled people are not necessarily good for a single job. They quit for personal reasons including wage, job safety. Don’t you see? There is a staff of 20 people in the beginning, and they get fired at the end of the week! Everyone needs safety”. So this is how we lose the professional skills we spend so many years to get.

“There is an increase in the number of journalists in Botosani due to a similar increase in the number of media outlets. But there is a consistent decline in the number of employees working for just one media institution. And payment is the main problem. You cannot expect a journalist to preserve his morality, neutrality and every single skill for a minimum wage on economy”, Cristian Lupaşcu of Botoşani says.

The strained relation between professional results and personal needs seems to be a permanent challenge for the Romanian media. *„Professional pride has a limit, and its survival depends on a decent pay. And I say that because I have reporters who are no longer children. They are in their 30s or 40s, their children are students, so they have to be the breadwinners. Most of them have declined offers from every media local outlet – of course, anyone wishing to open a TV channel comes to the „Monitor” and tries charming everybody – but they said „no” just because they know that here they can do their job as they wish, and I am talking of the issues they write about, and they get a decent pay. But when the „decent pay” part disappears then pride is fading away”, Moraru says.*

Cătălin Hegheş is one of the journalists who gave journalism up. Why? *„The lack of money, for one reason. And I left also because I felt I was under the level I wanted to be. I was rather patching things rather than doing my job at my best. I didn’t have the time to spend two or three hours in a court and study all those files. The profession was no longer motivating. I was fed up with the things I had to do. For instance, going to the city hall everyday and watch the mayor’s self-pride. In case you have a contract with the city hall, then you must go there, and it takes time to attend every inauguration or route painting”.*

In Oradea, salaries are the main issue, Ichim Vasiliică, journalist at Oradea Press and Crişana, says. *“It’s mostly pathetic. Therefore it’s dead clear that you do it for the love of it. And the profession involves a lot of accountability. And this is the reason why, in Oradea at least, fewer and fewer people are joining it. We are the same few journalists wandering from one newsroom to another”.*

„State instituions are the only ones in Romania offering a pay above human bondage, and there are situations when obedience is carefully preserved through 6 month-contracts”, journalist Teo Tiţă says.

Salaries range from 500 to 2,000 lei, most of them between 900-1,500 lei, according to local media journalists we interviewed.

5.4. Schools of Journalism

In terms of journalism schools, most of our subjects say things are getting worse. Brândușa Armanca, a university professor herself, believes there is a huge gap between the professional journalism taught in school and the industry. „It was a gap and so it remained. Nothing improved. Despite the graduates who obviously remain in the media, no more than a third remain in the field, hence the declining interest in such schools across the country”.

Yet, journalism schools offered 2000 places for the academic year 2012-2013 (paid from the state budget or not). Together with the offer of public relation and communications schools, we reach 5000 places. In 2014 9,6 candidates fought for one place at FJSC. Such rich offer comes against a steeply declining market. Due to the economic crisis 6000 jobs were lost in the media, while the journalists’ income has gone down.

Editors-in-chief or journalists who appreciate the graduates of the journalism schools represent the exception. *„Journalism schools do no create journalists, they just let them believe they will become Andreea Marin, or Măruță, or Mihaela Rădulescu. Or Mircea Badea. Something which has nothing to do with journalism. The profession is something totally different, you need other skills and abilities. Journalism schools should not encourage false expectations”* Anca Spânu believes, deputy editor-in-chief, *Viața Liberă*, Galați. *„It is because in many journalism schools important subjects for the journalism practice are taught by people that have never worked one day in a newsroom”* Anca Spânu believes. Media professionals can teach in universities only if they accept to be „paid per hour” for ridiculous amounts; therefore media professionals are not attracted to journalism schools, and the education of young journalists remains mainly theoretical.

„Many came as interns, few remained. That is because many of them believed that television means to be on air, on TV, to be a star. When they were sent in the field, when they were asked to do something else – to write a text, collect information, do research – they lost their interest. Things look much more attractive from the outside” says Diana Bogeia, TVR Timișoara

Other journalists have a different opinion. *„I was on the other side, too, I was asked to manage the TV department of the Journalism School. Students activate as volunteers, it is considered a period of internship, people who come know what it is about and get involved and with little guidance they are doing fine. They have potential, they have ideas. Very often they bring a new approach, interesting topics. They are passionate and enthusiastic and do a good job”* says Vasile Hotea Fernezan, TVR Cluj.

“I want to work with young people”, says Delia Gavriliu, manager of the portal PresaGalați.ro. *“They know more about social networks, they have better skills, they can handle the equipment and it is easier for them to upload information on the website”.*

Alexandru Lăzescu believes it is the media environment that represents the main issue, and not the journalism schools. „They could learn the theory, even if the quality of the educators is going down, but where could they apply what they learn?”

Faculties cannot be held responsible for sending a graduate in a distorted environment, Ovidiu Vanghele believes. „You can teach things that are valid in a normal world, but our situation is not normal politically, economically, in any way. They abandon their principles in no time. One has two options: get up and leave – but where would one go? – or stay and accept”.

„It's not about lack of conscience. But if people make the environment, then the environment makes the people. If from the very beginning you are used to the mentality „make your boss happy and your boss is a moron”, that is your normality. You behave yourself and produce news. New people come, they look around, if the others do that, they do the same as they don't want to lose their job. The new comers see that is the way to do it. It is no longer what it used to be normality of 2007. They were still frolicking then. They are not prepared for the profession. They have never been. I wasn't prepared for the profesion either' There is no Romanian media school. Practice is the only Romanian media school, that's why what I said earlier is tragic”. (Teo Tlăță)

The voice of the academics is not heard and that is another serious issues for the journalism schools, Brândușa Armanca believes. „Nobody wants that. My colleagues from important journalism schools in Bucharest, Cluj or Iași seldom make any public statements on the current mass media situation”.

Conclusions

The decline in Romanian media quality is closely linked to the lack of staff and professionalism of the newsrooms staff. It is difficult to produce quality content under the current circumstances. The number of the journalists is going down month after month, those who remain are required to work more and low salaries are not motivating at all.

There are less and less job opportunities for those who want to practice their profession in good faith and this lack of alternative has become a serious concern.

Having almost no perspectives for a long career, journalism graduates are not welcome on the steeply declining labour market they have to join.

Box

In short:

- Supporting jobs – text editors, designers – were the first to disappear.
- The number of journalists has gone down by 30%; some newsrooms operate with 3-4 people that have to do everything.
- Newsroom shrinkage has resulted in reduced attention and capacity to cover the subjects, especially those that define the media watchdog role.

- Journalists have more tasks. They also have to produce materials for the online editions, to take photos, shoot, edit, upload and promote the materials.
- The market has shrunk and often journalists have to ‚behave themselves‘ if they want to have a job.
- Managers say it is difficult to find journalists.
- There is no interest in the journalists‘ professional training.
- Newsrooms can no longer afford to invest in documentation.
- Journalists believe that low salaries and the lack of job stability represent some of the most serious issues they have to cope with.
- Higher education graduates have very low salaries, sometimes the minimum wage on economy,
- There is a major gap between the university and the industry.

6. The erosion of public trust in the media, the loss of journalists‘ professional identity

„Trust allows you to do almost anything. Those who hate us, like the president of the county council, he really hates us, advertise in our newspaper. They know it is the only way to reach the people. If they want the people to swallow at least part of what they say, it has to be published here. Politicians know that people trust us“. (Cătălin Moraru)

After 1989 media attracted public trust, coming third among the credible institutions, after the Church and the Army, with a rate of 80%. However, the public trust decreased and in 2014 only 35% of the public trusted the media. The decrease should be considered in the broader context of an increased trust in the ‚strong‘ institutions (army, gendarmery, intelligence service), while the public administration and the civil society are still not trusted.

According to a study released by Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2014,¹² only 7% of the Romanians believe the media are totally independent, while 31% believe that media are „rather dependent“. Television comes first in terms of credibility (30%), followed by the online media (27%), radio (13%) and print media (11%).

The loss of trust is not entirely something negative. It may equally express the increased criticism of the Romanian media consumers toward their sources of information and the fact they have higher expectations. It is also the result of a consistent and constant public discourse against media, initiated at very high political levels (president, ministers, MPs). Politicians have never been too kind to the Romanian journalists, but, in the past ten years, their discourse has become very tough and insulting, without any nuances. Noteworthy that the concept of ‚jukebox-journalist‘ was launched by president Traian Băsescu during his conflicts with those he called „media moguls“.

At the same time, important media owners and renowned journalists are indicted / condemned for corruption or blackmail, which can also account for the erosion of media credibility. *„There is unfair competition in the media. It basically includes everyone, but not all of them practice*

¹² Studiul privind independența și credibilitatea presei române, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014

journalism. In some cases it's only lousy blackmail. They publish 600 copies. They want to put pressure on the mayor so he finds 150 copies on his desk the following day. People end up believing that is real press. They don't know that it is not journalists' job to hit people on the head", believes Cătălin Hopulele.

„Journalists are guilty of selling themselves to anybody. Unfortunately, few journalists are still objective. Or, even worse, in time few have remained faithful to a cause” thinks Brândușa Armanca.

„It is strange that people change their strong, partisan beliefs at a certain point. There are spectacular switches, like the case of Andrei Bădin (from Intact/Antena to B1TV) or Radu Preda (from Intact/Antena to Giga TV owned by a local PDL „baron”, and later on to a position in the Ponta Government), to give only two examples. „The trumpets of one group” are attracted to the opposite group, they receive space and money to air the partisan discourse they convey. Relevant neutral journalists like Mihnea Măruță are almost invisible in the media, with the exception of independent blogs” Comănescu added.

One of the reporters we interviewed in Alexandria told us that some journalists in his city do not understand it is not their fight. *“They see the other journalists as enemies. They attack the other journalists in their newspapers”.*

To be fair we should accept that the loss of media credibility stems mainly from the decrease in the quality of journalism, from neglecting minimal journalism standards - which the audience know and appreciate - willingly, repeatedly and sometimes as part of an editorial policy. *„As a media professional I see that as a lack of respect toward the profession. We write as we please, we shoot as we like, we do not obey minimal standards. If we add to all that the bad and unstable economic situation, the level of quality is very low. The lack of rule becomes the rule”* thinks Constantin Trofin. Moreover, media professionals have failed to react and reject such attitudes, which, in the public eye, are indicative of all media. *„The loss of credibility is obvious, when you are in the field you hear very often ,we know what you, journalists, are like’, you only write what you are told. You can feel that from official sources to ordinary people”* a journalist from Focșani said.

Cătălin Moraru feels that the low media quality is *,rather the loss of respect for the profession. It is because so many websites, newspapers, media in general have become so openly partisan, that being different is almost incredible”.*

„The thirst for sensationalism in past years has destroyed the journalist and media credibility. If it is not sensational it doesn't sell”, says Hannelore Petrovai.

“Some of the texts I write are published, others aren't. Eventually that affects me, because people may say ‘look at that, this guy writes only positive things. And it's not ok” (a journalist from Iași)

„I feel the loss of credibility as a serious issue” says Ichim Vasiliță, *„but not because of the way I do my job. It is the most visible people that do not do their job properly, and that is the problem, for example, the televisions with a clear agenda. Such people do not represent me and I don't*

think it's ok to talk about my work in such terms. Unfortunately, people label things very easily, they tend to generalize".

The global context has worsened the Romanian media situation, and the technological developments affect the paradigm of the „traditional journalism”. The erosion of journalism credibility is doubled by the loss of the professional identity. The emerge and spreading of the Internet have ‚democratized’ the access to communication tools, formerly accessible only to professional journalists. Social networks disseminate the media materials, the brand identity of the channel that generated the material or the name of the author are irrelevant for the consumer. Companies and state institutions have opened their own channels of communication with the public, using only journalism tools, without any concern regarding the public interest. Thus journalists have lost their privileged position in society in terms of collecting, processing and disseminating the information. „We have failed to explain to the public that social media is good at multiplying the message, but you still need content. And to have quality content, you need journalists. If the newsroom die, social media can't replace anything” Believes Remus Basalic, a journalist with *Viața Liberă*, Galați.

The Internet has taken not only the journalists' sources of income (less than half of the users are willing to pay for media content, and when they do that they spend very small amounts¹³), but also the ‚esoteric’ professional identity, by giving the impression that ‚anyone can be a journalist’. Typical elements that could redefine and bring new values to the profession – serving the public interest, professional standards, labour ethics, a brand that ‚certifies’ the quality of the journalistic products, solidarity of the profession - are, unfortunately, extremely fragile in Romania.

„You know what is missing in the media now? There is no competition spirit. We were competitors, we knew one another, we were following each other's activity. After many years, in relation to the Copos story, I felt there was a small competition, you wanted to do your best and be the first one to give the information” says Sidonia Bogdan. Why? „It is a kind of indifference. Who shall we fight with? Everyone has their little place, they have realized that personal branding is the only way to survive in this profession and everyone is trying to create his reputation. In the past it was the place where you worked that mattered. Now it's who you are” she continued. „ Social media are very useful. That's how I promote my stories. I get sources, tips. Before I had to travel a lot. For a 2-hour subject, I had to spend 5 hours, because people want to talk to you when they learn that you are a journalist, they think you are a society expert. And they asked me all sorts of questions. And I said I should move that on Facebook. It is important how you interact with people, because journalism is the most transparent profession. Look at my merchandise, think, ask me, I'll answer you. Have I done something wrong? OK, tell me. I have nothing to hide. From this point of view, I think it is a very nice game, the charm of the profession”, Sidonia Bogdan says.

Other journalists share the same opinion. *„The personal credibility matters, even if the credibility of the profession has disappeared lately. Yet I have another problem. I feel the loss of credibility rather like having less time for investigations, things flow somehow automatically and I do not*

¹³

<http://cloudsense.com/blog/to-open-the-window-of-opportunity-rebuild-the-house>

cover the topics I'd like to. But even so, if you have imposed certain standards and people know you make a certain kind of materials, I think it's ok" says Hotea Fernandez.

"The relation with the sources has not changed, yet we can't boast with investigations like those of Rise Project, for example. And then, people are not afraid of us when we publish our materials. For that you need to pay one or two journalists every month, even if they do not publish any material; but the financial situation doesn't allow it, though it would be normal to have at least one person in the newsroom that could do it" says Melania Cincea.

„I try to do my job correctly and honestly. Because of the television and Facebook, those who swallow the information do not make any difference between good guys and bad guys. Sometimes I am criticised for writing only facts: why don't you write they are thieves? It's like shouting at a football match – go, get them! – write everything, don't let me draw the conclusions" Cătălin Moraru says.

„Some journalists rather represent their sources and colleagues than the public", Comănescu says. „Especially if they have spent some time in news television, they write in order to make politicians call them and colleagues quote them. It's not about corruption, it's simply the belief that it is the impact on the political world that matters and not a large, unspecialized audience. In this respect, politics and media have become a sort of closed system, with a limited public, which includes the actors in the play and the old voters that such media channels target", he continued.

Box:

In short

- More and more often politicians' discourse is extremely tough, and plainly insulting toward journalists
- Media owners and renowned journalists are indicted / sentenced for corruption or blackmail, which has diminished the credibility of the profession.
- The low quality of journalism, as a result of repeatedly and willingly disregarding minimal journalism standards, sometimes as part of the editorial policy, has also added to the loss of credibility.
- The lack of media professionals' strong reaction against such attitudes has legitimized the lack of credibility in the public eye.
- The erosion of the journalism credibility is doubled by the loss of professional identity. The emerging and spreading of the Internet have 'democratized' the access to mass communication, which used to belong only to professional journalism
- It is the personal credibility that matters, even if the credibility of the profession has faded away lately.

7. Public media

The low performance of the public channels is a huge issue for the Romanian media. They could impose the standards and offer models for the private channels. Under the current circumstances, there is no pressure to enhance professionalism". (Teo Tiță)

The political control over the public radio and television has been a frequent topic in the discussions with media professionals. With one exception, no TVR Council of administration has ended their 4-year mandate. All of them were replaced, following the rejection of the activity report by the Parliament. The same thing happened again in 2015, when the CA presided by Stelian Tănase was replaced. (Stelian Tănase had become the TVR director in December 2013). Several members of the CA in the public radio haven been found in situations of incompatibility. The 2014 activity report of the Public Radio was not discussed in the Parliament. According to the Public Radio, they closed the financial year 2014 with an excedent of over 7 million lei.

At the end of 2014, the Public Television owed over 700 million lei. Apart from the faulty management and dubious programme purchase, the lack of capital is equally the result of political decisions (the radio-TV fee has stayed the same for 10 years, the TVR contribution to the cinematography fund represents 15% of the advertising contracts, as opposed to the contribution of private channels which only reaches 3%). Very often we hear that such taxes should be abrogated. At the end of 2015 a draft law in this respect was submitted to the Parliament.

„The Council of Administration includes non-professionals, politically appointed, the President Director General is replaced everytime the parliamentary majority changes – the two major causes that seriously affect the editorial independence of the news departament and the political programmes”, thinks Mihnea Măruță.¹⁴

„During the protests of 2014, TVR Timișoara acted cowardly and was unable to comply with news professional starndards. There were 4000-5000 people in the main square, and the television was broadcasting live about a case of 12 children with food poisoning. Local stations have always been marginalized, despite the fact they have the best people, but journalistically speaking, they do no matter. Moreover, the programme of the local stations has been turned into a permanent folklore program. It is incredible how they have turned everything so rural”, Brândușa Armanca says.

People inside the public media told us how the control functions: *„You receive orders in the news department. We pay attention to things that should not be on TV because we receive a phone call. Once the producers even said that we should change the name of the department into an Order Center, because we receive so many orders from our bosses, that we can't cope with them any more”. Generally speaking „the orders are rather positive than negative, it is about what we should broadcast, and not so much about what we shouldn't. Because if it is an important topic, we can't afford to miss it. And, though they are not happy with that, the bosses do not tell us that, especially to those of us with a big mouth, that would protest if we were censored”* says Vasile Hotea Fernezan.

There are reactions against censorship, says Petrișor Obae: *„On a day with massive street protests all over the country, the editor of the TVR 1 news bulletin refused to approve the presentation of the images in the main edition. Several journalists protested and the images were shown later, but on the second channel, TVR2”.*

14 A statement for „Media Sustainability Index”, December 2014.

Iulian Comănescu has noted how easily some TVR managers get over possible conflicts of interests. *„There was a strange situation in the 2012 evaluation commission, related to personnel firing. A former TVR news manager had acted as a consultant for an insurance company, during his manager mandate. He insisted on mentioning this position in his activity report (a sort of CV) – therefore I understand he did not see anything wrong. Another news manager had political links with both PSD and PDL, and thought he qualified to run the news department of the public television”*

8. Solidarity

„The media situation resembles that of the justice several years ago. If we want to be independent and strong, we need to have our own voice. We need to become players and sanction the politicians reactions and the mistakes of the media professionals”. (Sidonia Bogdan, journalist, România Liberă)

The reaction of the media community has been rather weak lately. According to journalists, that is not because of the work schedule, pressure or low salaries. *„I think people work in such fast pace, that during their little time off, they don't want to hear anything about the profession”* says Remus Florescu, president of APPC. *„The community of media professionals needs cohesion. What the bosses in the newsroom think – that is the problem. If they forbid or impose conditions, that is the end of it”.* (a journalist in Focșani). Other journalists say that *„probably passivity comes from the fact that we have fought our own battles alone”* (Vasile Hotea Fernezan, Cluj).

Cora Muntean, Europa FM correspondent and president of Mediasind Târgu Mureș says *„you can't expect solidarity from journalists that have been bought”* and one needs to select the journalists they want to be associated with. *„Only self-regulation can protect journalists' independence. I don't expect Mr Politician to come and protect my independence. I believe there is enough regulation at the moment. I know the regulation and I think it is enough. If we only used it”,* Hotea Fernezan says.

Moreover, there is very high turnover in the industry, which – according to some journalists – makes impossible any kind of professional association.

„In all European countries, when the crisis started, media united. We saw incredible situations, when competitors joined to buy a printing house, or local newspapers in the Netherlands, which had their own news agency in Amsterdam, got together to get over the crisis. In Romania, if we wait a bit longer, there will be no one to unite us” Cătălin Moraru believes. It is the associations that offer a service and serve a clear need that survived, like the Romanian Audit Bureau of Circulation (BRAT).

Very often journalists say they have never thought about getting together. *„Do you believe me if I tell you I have never discussed such issues with my colleagues? And I don't know if they talk about that. We have never talked how to get together, do something, an association that could help us”* told us Cristi Donose, TVR journalist in Iași.

„As an association it is difficult to fight against the big media employers or against those who pay high salaries on time. Journalists will never fight against them because that is where their money comes from. It is the task of the NGOs to do that” says Teo Tiță.

Daniel Ciurel, a journalist from Timișoara, believes that *„in every town there are a couple of people that would like to associate, but they scattered and need some one to bring them together. Journalists won’t be able to do that alone, they need you, they someone to lead them”.*

In 2015 we witnessed a certain revival of the solidarity reactions, especially on the part of the Convention of Media Organizations. COM made public its reactions in case of the attempts at changing the legislation pertaining to freedom of expression, as well in cases of unethical attitudes.

COM reacted ¹⁵ against the sensationalist coverage of the fire in the Colectiv Club, in October 2015, when 63 people died and over 100 were wounded. A group of journalists in the local media initiated a new association that would represent their interests..

9. Legal actions against journalists

Few journalists in the local media complained about being sued recently. Most of them admit that is because they have „behaved themselves” and not because the politicians have suddenly understood the need to freely express oneself. *„Since we became superficial, they haven’t sued or aggressed us. I’ve hhave been sued ten times, in 2004 period. It was the time of investigations. The investigative journalism died out in 2008-2009. They didn’t threat or sue us because they had the economic power. More subtle, but stronger”,* says Lidia Voro, a journalist with Zi de Zi, Târgu Mureș. *„Now if politicians have a problem with a material, they immediately call our bosses. Sometimes the publication is postponed, and the story is published later, but this is the happy situation”,* she continued.

„They no longer sue you because they prefer to call the owner directly, thus they solve the problem faster and more easily” says one journalist in Oradea.

Remus Florescu has a different point of view: *„Only a few colleagues have had legal problems, which could be a problem in itself: the media are very weak and do not disturb. You need to write something to have problems with the law. But you don’t have time for that, if you have to produce five items of news daily”.*

If the telephone cannot convince media owners and editors-in-chief, then the journalists are vulnerable. *„We are very vulnerable. Freedom of expression is protected, but the laws are not enforced. And it is more and more obstructed by new laws. So far the legislation has been ok. Now, new legislation or changes in the civil or penal code always bring something to obstruct freedom of expression”* says Cătălin Moraru. *„And it’s not about writing superficially or without proofs, they sue you to intimidate you, to make you waste time in court and to think twice to make sure it is worth publishing an investigation”.*

¹⁵ <http://www.cji.ro/analiza-si-recomandari-cum-a-agravat-o-parte-a-presei-drama-din-clubul-colectiv/>

„The trials against us have been more like a sort of harassment. The newsroom backs up its people, not very strongly, but still. We even have a lawyer. But in general we are very careful with our writing; the Romanian language is very sophisticated, you can say many things in many words, with many meanings. We pay attention to our language. We offer our point of view, we admit when we are wrong, because it happens, we give clarifications, so we show our good faith and thus avoid many trials”, says Silvia Vrânceanu.

Orlando Toader is one of the journalists that have been sued. *„Me and a colleague journalist were sentenced in the first instance for an article we didn't write. Well, it was our mistake, too, because we didn't go to any hearing, as we didn't think someone can sentence you for something you did not do. Now the trial is in Arad Court. We went to court, we have a lawyer. The guy that sued us requests 20 000 lei and court charges”.*

Mihai Fircă, an editor with Digi 24 Craiova, thinks that laws and provisions in the Criminal Code in the past two years affect the freedom of the press. Such opinions are rare, most of the interviewees are not aware of the changes in the civil and criminal code or other secondary legislation that may affect the freedom of expression. Most of the broadcast journalists admit they have not read the law or the broadcast code.

However, in mainstream media the cases are more frequent. Politicians or magistrates sue star journalists. Journalists sue or threaten one another. That is a symptom of the mainstream media polarization, of their affiliation to various groups of interests. Sometimes, such trials are used to intimidate or as PR tools.

Conclusions

Journalists should be more informed with regard to the legislation that directly affects their activity. The lack of knowledge affects the vulnerable journalists, more likely to be sued.

Journalists should observe professional standards when they document and produce their materials.

Professional associations and trade unions should secure legal assistance to journalists. In Cluj, a lawyer specialised in labour law assists APPC members and decides if they can go to court.

10. Issues "under scrutiny"

As mentioned at the beginning of the present report, the problems exposed so far have resulted from interviewing 100 media professionals. They perceive them as problems, have to cope with them and try to solve them or at least to live with them.

They draw the picture of a scared, vulnerable and re-active professional community. The economic survival is the recurrent topic, outweighing problems related to the media system, strategy or long term growth.

Noteworthy that major issues on the media agenda all over the world are not perceived as problems.

First of them refers to the **preservation of the freedom of expression** as a fundamental principle of journalism and, even more important, as a fundamental human right. Though journalists and managers are equally interested in the practical aspects related to freedom of expression (censorship, self-censorship, pressures, legal actions meant to intimidate, etc) most of our interviewees did include legal framework among their concerns. They are either unaware of the legislative changes or the debates surrounding such topics, or consider they are 'too small' to take part in the debate. Local journalists are not very worried about the Big Brother legislation and the conflict it creates related to the freedom of expression, personal data protection and national security. Their information come mainly from the mainstream media coverage of the topic, rather than from their own documentation and it is perceived more like a limitation of the citizens' rights and not so much as an attack against the journalists working tools.

There is the almost a general perception of the local journalists that local media do not have the means or the potential to play a part in the parliamentary debate on this topic – or in any other debate. Yet there are outstanding cases of local journalists that have confronted the MPs in their constituencies, and held them accountable for the initiatives, votes or statements in the Parliament. Media materials with a strong impact resulted, which the mainstream media could not have produced and would not have been interested to do.

The **digital switchover** is the second topic, which seems to be missing from the local media agenda. Most of our interviewees were not only uninformed, but also uninterested in the topic, though the effects of the switch off are extremely dangerous for the freedom of expression. With the switch off of 17 June 2015, about 170 local televisions face the risk to go off air if they either do not find resources for digital multiplexes or alternative broadcasting solutions (cable, the Internet). The communities they serve will lose the source of local information and will only have the information broadcast by central media. The lack of interest does not refer only to journalists or the need to inform the population. The bids for the local multiplexes organized so far by ANCOM have not stirred the investors' interest either. The last bid, organized in April 2015, gathered only 4 competitors (one of them was disqualified). The minimum license fee (the starting bidding price) varies between 1000 euro, for a multiplex allocated to a town, which is not capital of the county, and 10 000 euro for a county multiplex. The Government established the licence fees in February 2014.¹⁶ The fact that we failed to meet the global deadline (17 June 2015), which was extended for Romania until December 2016 does not seem to have stirred much interest for the radio broadcasters or the public, which is largely uninformed.

Internet governance and the legislation and jurisdiction issues of the global network is the third topic that concerns the world community of journalists, but seems to be absent from the agenda of the Romanian media professionals and managers. For the Romanian journalists the Internet is a territory of almost absolute freedom, where it is acceptable to disregard

¹⁶ According to Hotnews, <http://m.hotnews.ro/stire/20050387>

professional rules – as long as there are no specific limitations applicable to the online environment. Most of our interviewees showed no interest in technical or legal aspects related to the implementation and monitoring of the international agreements regarding the Internet. Some of them expressed preference for stricter online regulations at a national level, to counter intellectual theft and plagiarism. Moreover, when it comes to parliamentary debates, several journalists fervently supported the position of the intelligence services, which had requested almost unlimited powers to survey the citizens.

The absence of such topics shows that the media industry has withdrawn from the public debate the themes that concern and affect it. Media professionals we have interviewed believe they do not have the necessary ‚strength‘ to change things, that the ‚countryside‘ cannot monitor or influence the decisions made in Bucharest, not to mention those in Brussels, which are perceived as unchangeable. Beyond this geographical divide, there is the idea that journalists should not participate in such discussions – either to their benefit or the media consumers‘. The interviewees largely share the opinion that it is the NGOs task to monitor the legal framework, the efforts to promote permissive media legislation and freedom of expression, and to protect journalists, in general. With very few exceptions none of respondents support such an NGO.

11. Possible solutions

Apparently there are no short term solutions. *Most managers say „first we have to see where journalism is heading, then we‘ll find solutions. For the moment we don‘t know where we are going“.*

More and more voices request the support of the state so that the watchdog of democracy does not disappear. Such support exists in other European countries. *„Not even subventions, simple VAT exemptions for those who pay for advertising, or banning the advertising fee. Or different treatment for copyrights in journalism, because it is not true that you can save a lot with copyright [contracts], you don‘t save that much“* Cătălin Moraru believes.

The authorities could solve part of the distribution problems. In December 2015, fifteen local and national publications asked the Prime Minister to set a threshold, by means of a Minister’s Order or an Emergency Ordinance, for the maximum level of the commission requested by the Romanian Post for the distribution of the print media subscriptions or to subsidize these institutions, based on the number of subscriptions.

Media professionals believe such help should be doubled by responsible and objective controls, which could clean the environment, disclose dirty money in the media and, why not, strengthen the statute of the journalist and restore the respect for the profession.

Changing the legislation that affect the media – the Labour Code, clearer provisions in the Fiscal Code with regard to independent activities – could also help the sector.

Syndicated content and infrastructure could be another solution. Thus, local newsroom would reduce their costs and benefit from quality content at much lower prices.

The journalists, dissatisfied with the situation in their newsroom, are trying to produce quality journalism with alternative financial resources: scholarships, grants, crowdsourcing or donations. Though they have immediate efficiency and solve concrete problems, such solutions do not secure the long term sustainability of the journalistic activity. „There is no viable model even for successful journalists. We are talking about scholarships journalism: if there is a scholarship, there is content” says Teo Tiță.

„ My option is not a solution. I'd like to have five more people, I know who they are, but I can't pay them. Because they are expensive, they read a 100-page report and understand it, and their follow-up leads to an extraordinary story. If I want that, I have to pay. To pay, I need money” Ovidiu Vanghele explains.

Most journalists mention the creation of a fund that would finance quality journalism products. However, they doubt that such a system could operate in Romania. „If the money comes from the authorities, it will be used like any public money for the media” says Liliana Spoeală from Brăila. Her concern is confirmed by the way the Government has designed the media state support for televisions. However, the idea of having a fund for journalism of „public interest” is valuable and deserves further exploring.

The constant training of journalists is crucial for the strengthening the quality of the Romanian media. It is more difficult to manipulate, and eventually, subordinate, a professional journalist, that is the unanimous opinion of the interviewees.

The public is part of the problem, but it should also be part of the solution. The education of the public is crucial. „If there is no educated public, there's no pointing in discussing” says Cătălin Moraru. He believes that the education of the public is the responsibility of NGOs.

Last but not least, it is the urgent need for the journalists to associate. More than ever, media professionals should strongly condemn any mistakes of the community and, at the same time, fight for a civilized atmosphere in the media and the protection of the freedom of the expression.

All interviews revealed the need for leadership. Avoiding the passive voice is in the DNA code of the profession. Therefore it is surprising to see how many statements refer to leadership when it comes to actions and solutions. Journalists, managers or owners, all of them are waiting for a solution or for someone else to take the initiative and solve their problems.

For the moment, there is capacity to react and such leadership would determine the cohesion of the community. Obviously nobody would be accepted unanimously, but there might be an organization able to gather a group that could be seen as legitimate. Under the circumstances, an initiative like the Convention of Media Organization has the potential to supply the necessary leadership as well as the successful example of strengthening the journalistic community. Moreover, it may convey to the public the commitment of the media professionals to assess their values and continue their mandate of serving the public interest.

