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A BLIND EYE ON NEWS:

SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE ALBANIAN MEDIA

Tirana, 2015



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to offer a complete overview of the roots and causes of self-censorship in the Albanian media as well as the forms in which it appears, based on the perceptions of media professionals. In view of the absence of previous studies on this phenomenon in the Albanian media, the findings of this study aim to raise awareness of the presence and influence of self-censorship on freedom of expression and the quality of professional media, with the goal of providing the public with balanced and objective information. This study also offers a series of recommendations on the necessary means and mechanisms that should be raised to fight self-censorship in Albania, based on the suggestions of media professionals involved.

The drafting of this report used a mixed methodology, based on primary and secondary data. On one side, the report summarizes a review of international literature, which sheds light on the definitions and causes of self-censorship, as well as forms it assumes in different contexts, but also offers an overview of the situation and presence of the factors interconnected with self-censorship in the Albanian media based on existing studies. The report also presents the primary and secondary data collected in the field through questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire used for the collection of quantitative data contains 14 open and closed questions organized in five main fields and completed by 121 journalists and editors. The in-depth interviews were realized with 22 media professionals, including journalists, editors, editor-in-chiefs, directors and representative of civil society organizations active in the media and freedom of expression fields. The group of media professionals chosen for the study was selected in order to equally represent men and women as well as for their geographic spread, by including professionals from Tirana and three regions of the country.

Based on literature and international studies, the factors and causes of self-censorship are grouped in three main categories: outside indirect or direct pressure toward a media organization; the pressure felt inside a media organization; and the socialization of journalists with the values of the news organization. In accordance with these three main categories the findings of this study are presented in three main sections: 1) The perception of the media climate in Albania by media professionals; 2) Perception of the influence of the media climate on the editorial policy of specific media outlets; and 3) The frequency and forms of self-censorship among Albanian media professionals.

The professionals involved in the study recognize the positive developments in the Albanian media over the past two decades since the fall of the communist regime, such as the creation of a pluralistic media scene, the increase in the number of print and audiovisual media outlets, the diversification of formats and the development of online media, the reduction of physical attacks against journalists and the improvement of the legal framework, albeit not always unimplemented. However, they do not perceive journalism in Albania today as independent and objective, due to the censorship and self-censorship imposed by political and economic pressures, financial insufficiency, lack of professionalism and ethics and the lack of respect for the rights of journalists.

Some of the key findings of the study regarding the above mentioned aspects, which negatively affect the media situation in the country, shed light on the roots of self-censorship.

- The media climate in Albania is reported to be under the strong pressure of external factors, which directly impact negatively its quality. Although 50% of the respondents report the strong influence on the Albanian media of factors such as “pressure from public institutions,” “pressure through state-sponsored advertising,” and “pressure from big advertisers;” 75% of respondents consider the “owner’s economic interests,” “owner’s political links,” and “financial insufficiency,” as the factors with the biggest influence in this regard.
- Regarding the main challenges faced by media professionals in the country, more than 80% of the respondents to the survey evaluated as negative or very negative “pay and job security,” and the “protection of rights” of journalists and editors. At the same time, more than half of the respondents evaluated negative or very negatively “work conditions,” and “motivation and professional development.”
- The above-mentioned factors are evaluated as very important in the molding of editorial policy that media organizations follow. More than half of the respondents report that the media they work for does not have a written editorial policy, while their editorial line is easily influenced by different factors, such as the “owner’s economic and political interests,” “outside pressure/interventions,” “newsworthiness” and “competition for audience.”
- Although unwritten, the media’s editorial policy - perceived as political bias – is reported to have been evident to journalists before they joined a media outlet, or was transmitted informally after they started work, through orders from owners and editors, censorship of news or suggestions from colleagues.
- These pressures inside a media organization to enforce the editorial policy imposed by the owners are reported to influence importantly “the avoidance of certain news,” “one-sided news coverage,” “positive/PR coverage of political and financial partners” and “lack of critical and investigative journalism.”
- Based on the perceptions of journalists on the forms and frequency of self-censorship, the findings show that self-censorship is a widespread phenomenon in the Albanian media.
- More than 70% of the professionals involved in the study believe that journalists in Albania avoid coverage of certain news stories. Almost half of the respondents declare they have avoided news often or even very often. The genres of news most avoided are those connected to “political events” (70%) “organized crime” (60%) and “the economy” (50%).
- The main factors that push journalists toward self-censorship are reported to be “the economic and political interests of media owners,” “lack physical security” and “lack of job security.”

The quantitative data detailed in this report are illustrated with concrete examples reported by professionals and Albanian media experts that took part in the study.

The main recommendations identified by the participants in this study in order to curb self-censorship in the Albanian media focus mainly on the fight against external factors connected with the roots and causes in a wider context. The main recommendations identified in this study are grouped under: 1) media ownership and financing; 2) work conditions and protection of journalists; and 3) professionalism and ethics.

Media Ownership and Financing

- Promotion of employee/journalist owned media outlets in Albania
- Development of online media outlets as a response to the mainstream media's failure to be financially independent, which could act as a balancing factor to the power of traditional media owners
- Increased scrutiny and transparency of media finances and finances of media owners, which would include their other non-business interests
- Increased transparency in state-sponsored advertising
- Integration of local media outlets into a larger market in order to enable serious investment and financial self-reliance through sales and advertising

Work conditions and protection of journalists

- Better enforcement of the labor code by media outlets, which includes paying salaries in full and on time, as well as respect for holidays, overtime and sick leave for journalists
- Establishment and strengthening of self-regulatory bodies and unions in order to improve the professional standing of the journalistic profession

Professionalism and Ethics

- Written ethics code and editorial policies
- University curricula improvement
- Life-long training for journalists
- Support for investigative journalism and coverage of underreported areas and groups

1. INTRODUCTION

During Albania's Stalinist communist regime, the media was under the ownership of state institutions, controlled by the Workers Party and trade associations, with its editorial output strictly censored under political guidelines. Following the collapse of the regime in 1991, freedom of expression was guaranteed by law and over the next two decades, during Albania's tumultuous transition to democracy, a vibrant media market developed with hundreds of publications in print, online and broadcast.

For a country of only 2.8 million people, Albania today has a flourishing media scene, with 25 daily newspapers, more than 100 TV channels, 36 monthly magazines and 69 quarterly publications.¹ However, despite the presence on the market of large number of outlets, Reporters Without Borders ranked Albania in 85th place out of 173 countries in its "Freedom of the Press Index" for 2014.² This represents a marked drop since 2003, when Albania was ranked in 34th place and was the best performer in the Western Balkans. Although a downward trend has been registered in the past decade across the region, the pace at which Albania's assessment in the index has fallen is steeper compared to its neighbors.

Freedom House similarly rated the country only as "partly free" in its 2014 Freedom of the Press report.³ Though overt state-sponsored censorship is not present in the Albanian media any longer, the phenomenon of self-censorship is widespread, found in both private and state-owned media, and represents one of the biggest challenges to the media market today.⁴

Self-censorship occurs when journalists themselves prevent the publication of information. Journalists practice self-censorship because they are fearful of what could happen if they publish certain information — they fear injury to themselves or their families, lawsuits or other economic consequence.⁵ This form of censorship has a direct, negative impact on access to information and media freedom, which are considered vital elements for systems that allow people to hold governments accountable in achieving economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability.

Self-censorship did not appear in Albania immediately after the collapse of the communist regime and the introduction of independent non state-owned media outlets in the market. The 1990s was defined mostly by the confrontation between media, the government or political actors. In the following decade, the struggle between the government and media actors subsided. However, problems in regards to media freedom persisted in the form of economic pressures, lawsuits and nontransparent allocation of state advertising.

1. Besar Likmeta, "Big Advertisers Subvert Albanian Media Freedom," Balkan Insight (website), 20 December 2013

2. Reporters Without Borders, Freedom of the Press Index, 2014, <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>

3. Freedom House, Freedom of the Press Report, 2014, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/albania>

4. Self Censorship as a reality in the Albanian media, Ramadan Çipuri, http://www.academia.edu/8234767/Self-censorship_as_a_reality_in_the_Albanian_media

5. Global Self-Censorship Struggles: Lebanon, Mexico, China, Hong Kong and Slovakia. <http://www.salzburg.umd.edu/media-innovation/journalism-self-censorship>

Although Albania's constitution guarantees freedom of the press and publications are diverse, most media outlets in Albania show strong bias and partisanship, particularly during elections or periods of heightened political tensions and strife. According to Freedom House, in Albania, media ownership is not transparent and media outlets use self-censorship to "suit owners political and business interests".⁶ In its 2014 Albania Progress Report⁷, the European Commission also underlined that the lack of transparency of media financing remains a major challenge to freedom of expression. The report said the media in Albania continue to be used as a tool to promote political and private economic interests while lack of enforcement of labor rights among journalists makes them vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal and self-censorship.

The 2013 US State Department Country Report on Human Right Practices on Albania⁸ also highlighted the preponderance of the phenomenon among media practitioners, underlining that "political pressure and lack of funding constrained the independent print media, and journalists reported that they practiced self-censorship".

The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, in its Balkan Media Map,⁹ notes that editorial independence is not fully established among Albanian media and independent outlets face pressure from tax authorities and discrimination in the allocation of the state advertising budget, which, coupled with the influence of big advertisers in the telecommunication sector, fosters self-censorship.

A 2007 study of labor relations in the media in South East Europe¹⁰ highlights that the lack of labor rights in the media makes most journalists in Albania, including editors, prone to adjust their work in accordance with media owners' interests and apply self-censorship.

The only study that provides some insights into why journalists apply self-censorship in Albania was produced by Axel Kronholm, who interviewed a number of Albanian journalists for a bachelor thesis at the University of Gothenburg. Kronholm writes that most journalists he interviewed told stories of "violence or threats to violence," which make reporters think twice before they engage in investigations. "It is clear that Albanian journalists are working in an environment which fosters self-censorship. The boundaries – the topics, issues or people that are "off limits" – differ between media outlets and their political affiliation, but are usually well-known among the reporters of each outlet," Kronholm writes.¹¹ Even though self-censorship has been continuously reported as one of the main problems affecting the freedom of information and media in Albania, until now no previous study has been conducted to explore the root causes and forms.

6. Albania: Freedom of the Press Report, 2014. <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/albania#.VNQE4CwYFrg>

7. Albania Progress Report, European Commission, p.52 http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-albania-progress-report_en.pdf

8. US State Department Human Right Report, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>

9. Balkan Media Map. <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/71.13549/>

10. Labor Relations and Media. www.ijc.md/Publicatii/resurse/Labor_Relations_and_Media.pdf

11. Axel Kronholm, Press Freedom in Albania, University of Gothenburg (2013)

1.1 Aim and objectives of this report

This study focuses on the causes and forms of self-censorship in Albania, which impact negatively on media freedom and restrict the public's access to information. The findings of this study aim to raise awareness on this problem as well as identify recommendations on how to efficiently address it in order to improve freedom of expression and information through a more independent and pluralistic media, empower journalists to safely report on public interests issues and increase public access to information.

This report includes a literature review, which summarizes previous research undertaken in different countries, which were used to identify the main factors that induce journalists toward self-censorship in a selected media market. The report also analyzes the presence of these factors in the Albanian context, based on secondary data collected from previous studies on the media situation in Albania.

The report further presents the findings of its primary data on the roots and causes of self-censorship in Albania, collected through quantitative and qualitative research instruments. The primary data were collected through 22 in-depth interviews with key informants, including representatives of CSOs working in the media development sector, editors and journalists working in different media outlets, as well as through 121 questionnaires that were completed by editors and journalists, working both in national and local media outlets. The data collected provide insight into the frequency of the phenomenon in the Albanian media, the factors that induce it, the sectors of media coverage where it is most present, the way it is exerted in the newsroom as well as personal experiences of self-censorship.

Finally, the report presents a series of recommendations on how to tackle self-censorship in the Albanian media, which are based on suggestions received by journalists, editors and key informants interviewed as part of this study as well as conclusions drawn by the authors based on the primary and secondary data collected.

Although these findings are subject to the study of media practices in Albania, they are also relevant to other media contexts, particularly in South East Europe, where outlets operate under similar conditions of economic and political pressure.

Overall, the report seeks to encourage debate and contribute to the strengthening of freedom of expression and the public's access to information, not only as important rights on their own merit, but also as an essential tool toward the achievement of other human rights by enabling an accountable and sustainable system of governance.¹²

12. <http://www.article19.org/pages/en/freedom-of-expression.html>

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Self-censorship: International Considerations

International press watchdogs groups like IREX, Reporters Without Borders or Freedom House routinely identify self-censorship as one of the key indicators to assess a media environment in their yearly country reports. However, because self-censorship is generally a phenomenon that is difficult to document, often associated with the personal experiences of journalists, there is little theoretical and empirical literature, either in Albania or internationally. Furthermore it has been argued that blending self-censorship with other indicators of media freedom makes its “usefulness debatable”, because the phenomenon requires in-depth qualitative research to understand its roots, forms and causes in different media culture.¹³

In practice, self-censorship can occur both on an individual level of a journalist or on the level of an entire media organization. Generally, there are three main broad categories of self-censorship, which occur when there is direct or indirect external pressure on a media organization, when there is pressure inside a media organization or due to the assimilation of certain organizational values by journalists.¹⁴

The organizational culture of a media outlet is often internalized by journalists in their professional norms and practices. In a specific media environment, journalists often absorb what is permissible and what is not inside a media organization through explicit orders that they receive from editors, signs and the various practices that surround them in the newsroom. This process is often called “newsroom socialization”.

In the process of newsroom socialization, editors might use direct orders to avoid coverage of a certain topic, but most of the time journalists tend to stay within the bounds that have been set for them, which through time they tend to internalize as professional norms. This process of socialization to the norms of the newsroom means that few journalists feel that are the subject of control by the company or the media outlet they work for because they have internalized through time the media organization’s perspective, standards and taste.

For example, the handover of Honk Kong to China induced widespread self-censorship in the media there because of the media’s attempt to avoid coercive pressure or in order to secure favors. In such context, many journalists thought that their colleagues were afraid to criticize Beijing, but otherwise perceived themselves far more courageous in this regard.¹⁵

Because of the process of “socialization” in newsrooms or in the wider media environment, and the organizational norms and practices defining self-censorship is not easy, as the

13. Justifying Self-Censorship: A Perspective from Ethiopia, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1742843

14. Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Honk-Kong, The Harvard Journal of Press/Politics 1998 <http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/2/55>

15. Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Honk-Kong, The Harvard Journal of Press/Politics 1998 <http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/2/55>

selection or de-selection process of news by reporters and editors is a key part of journalistic practice. However, when news is avoided due to external pressure, in-house rules inside a media organization or because of the cultural expectations of the journalists or editors on certain topics, then withholding journalistic material takes the nature of self-censorship, which makes it detrimental to the values of freedom of expression and the media's mission to inform and educate the public.

Although it is generally accepted that self-censorship is a characteristic of media environments that are not free, in contrast to other indicators like incidents of official censorship, attacks on journalists, imprisonment of media workers or restrictive legislation towards the media, it is difficult to quantify.

In the countries where it has been studied, self-censorship has been often defined as *"a set of editorial actions ranging from omissions, distortions and changes of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations or the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishment from power structures"*.¹⁶

Generally, self-censorship is present in a media environment where there are laws that restrict media freedom. Defamation, libel and restrictive national security laws on sedition or treason have been often assumed to be key external factors that induce reporters, editors or entire media organizations toward self-censorship. The factors that pressure the journalist toward self-censorship can be public, private or in certain cases closely associated. Strong national security laws are often associated with strong penalties, in some cases even with the death penalty; however, the threat of defamation or libel suits can be just as threatening for journalists.

The fear of criminal charges based on national security laws has been often identified as an impediment to journalistic practice and as an external factor that induces journalist toward self-censorship in Africa, particularly in heavily media-regulated environments. In this context, Uganda is often cited as an example. There, the penal code contains serious penalties for defamation or seditious material. Although these laws and penalties are rarely used to charge journalists, they have a major impact on the media's coverage of corruption and government wrongdoing.

However, self-censorship is also commonplace in countries like the United States, which have a free media and liberal libel laws. There, the factors that influence journalist to avoid the news are different. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center at the Columbia University in 2000¹⁷, with 300 journalists and news executives, found that about a quarter of the respondents had purposely avoided newsworthy stories. Another quarter of the media professionals targeted in the survey admitted to softening the tone of stories to what they perceived was in the benefit of their media organization or parent company, while 41 per cent of respondents said that they engaged in both practices. The same poll found that among US journalists there is widespread concern about commercial and competitive pressures.

According to the Pew Research Center Survey in the US, market pressure is the key external factor that induced reporters toward self-censorship, often associated with several different

16. Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Honk-Kong, The Harvard Journal of Press/Politics 1998 <http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/2/55>

17. Self-Censorship: How Often and Why, Columbia Journalism Review. Self-Censorship: How Often and Why

forms. The survey points out that self-censorship was generally manifested in the news media where journalist avoided stories because they believed the audience might find them dull or too complicated, or avoided stories that could damage the news organization or parent company. However, self-censorship was manifested also because of factors linked directly with the journalist. For example a significant percentage of journalists would avoid covering stories that they believed could harm their relationship with sources, their standing as journalists or their career in general.

Self-censorship is also often associated with the cultural expectations of the journalists that might induce him/her to avoid covering a certain news story. For example in Rwanda, which was the scene of ethnic motivated genocide in 1994, most coverage of the ethnic conflict is considered a taboo topic for journalists.¹⁸ Self-censorship has been also been often associated with lack of journalistic training and professionalism. However, in certain cases the practice of self-censorship can be ethically defended. For example a number of US based international media outlets justified their decision not to publish cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed following the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* by arguing that it would pose a serious threat to their correspondents working abroad in the Middle East.

Another external factor identified as inducing media organizations toward self-censorship is the concentration of ownership in the market. Concentrated media markets can result in self-censorship toward sensitive topics after media outlets internalize the advertisers' concerns. In other cases, self-censorship can coexist with traditional censorship, creating multilevel censorship, which combines censorship by the state through its laws and institutions and the self-censorship of journalists, which comes from the pressure of corporate and private interests that are not regulated by the state.¹⁹

2.2. The roots of self-censorship in the Albanian media

The review of previous studies on self-censorship shows that the practice is associated with a number of external factors present in the media market, including the presence of strong defamation, libel and national security laws, market pressures, media concentration but also security and career concerns as well as cultural expectations that prompt journalists to avoid coverage of otherwise newsworthy stories. In order to assess the nature and forms of self-censorship in Albania, this study will present a review of these external factors in the Albanian media as assessed by previous studies and reports.

2.2.1. Working conditions, lack of contracts and labour law concerns

As the Pew Research survey conducted in the United States showed, career concerns can impact directly the decision of journalists and editors to avoid covering a perfectly newsworthy story. Work insecurity and regular violations of labor law are among the most frequently identified problems by journalists and media professionals in Albania as affecting their work, with some considering that these two issues are the main drivers behind the

18. Justifying Self-Censorship: A Perspective from Ethiopia, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1742843

19. Silent Assault: Multilevel Censorship as Media Repression in the Philippines, <http://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/pssr/article/view/4303/3905>

journalists' self-censorship which, according to media expert Lutfi Dervishi, "is absolute and [it] is cemented by now".²⁰

According to a 2012 survey by the Union of Albanian Journalists, out of a sample of 291 journalists, 42% stated they had signed a regular contract for the whole period of employment surveyed (2008 – 2011), while 26% had a contract for part of their employment period, and 32% did not have any contract.²¹ At the same time, the majority (80%) of journalists who benefitted from employment contracts considered that they had not been afforded an opportunity to meaningfully negotiate their terms with their employers, as the contracts they were asked to sign were based on a template prepared by the latter.²² That the existence of an employment contract does not necessarily mean the signatory journalist can work knowing that his labour rights are protected can be gauged from the fact that 65% of journalists reported that the years they worked with a contract did not match the years they actually worked in the media.²³ Other journalists reported that although employers might sign contracts with media professionals, they would not always pay the relevant social security contributions.

Problems have also been reported about payment of salaries on time. In September 2013, the Union declared that during the last six months the salaries of journalists had been delayed in 75% of national media outlets for two to six months.²⁴ Journalists in Albania have often voiced concern as to how journalists are hired by the various media outlets and, more importantly, how much freedom they are afforded in carrying out their duties. It would appear that hiring journalists and editors is not carried out on the basis of merit. Journalists also do not enjoy the support of strong unions in advocating their labor rights. According to the 2014 EU Progress Report, "the capacity of journalists' trade unions remains weak".²⁵

2.2.2. Threats to and harassment of journalists

Security concerns are also an important factor that can induce media professionals or media outlets toward self-censorship. Violent incidents and incidents of harassment against journalists in Albania remain rare or at least remain unreported. It cannot, however, be accidental that such incidents seem to take place during periods of heightened political tension, when, according to previous studies, the incidence of self-censorship in the Albania media also increases.

20. South East European Media Observatory, *Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism*, 2014, available at http://mediaobservatory.net/sites/default/files/media%20integrity%20matters_zs%20web_FINAL.pdf The chapter on Albania, prepared by IldaLondo, is available at <http://mediaobservatory.net/sites/default/files/albania%201.pdf> The quote is mentioned at page 101.

21. Albanian Union of Journalists, *Informal Labour Practices in Albanian Media*, October 2012, available at http://www.fes-tirana.org/media/publications/pdf-files/2013/pub-130617-media-employment_eng.pdf, page 24.

22. Ibid, page 26.

23. Ibid, page 23.

24. Quoted in South East European Media Observatory, *Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism*, 2014, op. cit., page 100.

25. European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, *Albania 2014 Progress Report accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council*, COM(2014) 700 final, Brussels, 8.10.2014, SWD(2014) 304 final provisoire, available in English at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-albania-progress-report_en.pdf, page 43.

The experiences of three journalists in the aftermath of the 21 January 2011 riot shootings are a case in point. Ened Janina, political editor of the daily newspaper *Shekulli*, alleged that on that day he was ill treated by police while covering the demonstration. Despite the launch of a criminal investigation into his allegation, it would appear that by the publication, no perpetrator has been identified. The same day, reporter Fatos Mahmutaj was grazed by a bullet that killed one of the demonstrators. He reportedly received several death threats after he stated that the shots were fired by the National Guard and was forced to leave the country. He ultimately obtained political asylum in Belgium. Finally, reporter Artan Hoxha aired footage of the January 21 protest that allegedly showed how one of the protestors died. Hoxha stated that four days after the footage was broadcast, unknown men handed his 10-year-old son at home an envelope that contained three bullets. It is not clear whether the authorities ever launched an investigation into his allegation.²⁶ In June 2014, journalists came under attack by masked gunmen while covering the police operations in Lazarat, while another journalist was briefly held hostage by unknown individuals.

2.2.3. State of play of criminal and civil proceedings for slander and libel

Resolution 1577 (2007) *Towards decriminalisation of defamation*,²⁷ adopted on 4 October 2007 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), is one of the main standard-setting instruments in the field of decriminalisation of defamation. In its resolution, PACE called on member states to guarantee that there would be no abuse of criminal prosecutions for defamation. At the same time, states were requested to ensure that under their legislation persons pursued for defamation had appropriate means to defend themselves; thus media professionals should be allowed to establish the truth of their assertions or argue that their work was in the general interest.

States were also enjoined to set reasonable and proportionate award caps for damages and interest in defamation cases, so that the viability of a defendant media outlet is not placed at risk. Moreover, their legal systems should provide appropriate legal guarantees against awards for damages and interest that are disproportionate to the moral harm sustained by the plaintiff.

Recent (2012) comprehensive reforms of Albanian laws on criminal and civil defamation were the product of seven years lobbying by the Albanian Media Institute and the Open Society's Justice Initiative.²⁸ While these amendments²⁹ are positive and generally in line with the standards referred to above, the criminal law amendments in particular appear to constitute a combination of modernity and regression. Thus, the legislature retained the criminal classification of the offence of insult and although prison terms were abolished, the maximum fines that can be imposed were increased to 3 million leke (about 21,000 euro) while the conviction will be entered into the defendant's criminal record; these elements are enough to have a "gagging" or "chilling" effect on media professionals, as also noted by PACE's October

26. See among others US State Department, 2011 Human Rights Reports: Albania, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2011/eur/186322.htm>

27. Available at <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta07/eres1577.htm>

28. See article by Darian Pavli, *Running the Marathon: the Effort to Reform Albania's Defamation Laws*, April 2013, available in Albanian at <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/D.Pavli%20shqip%20follow-up.pdf>

29. An outline of these amendments is provided in Mr. Pavli's article, *ibid*.

2014 Resolution on Albania, which found that defamation has not been fully decriminalised.³⁰

Turning to the civil law amendments on defamation, while they reflect the most recent standards in the field, the question that remains to be answered is whether the judges will implement them in everyday practice. In particular, it remains to be seen whether Albanian judges will uphold the new principles (and more importantly, espouse their underlying rationale) or whether they will continue imposing high damages awards. According to the EU 2014 Progress Report, “Further action is needed to ensure the proper implementation of amendments on defamation and guidelines on setting damages at a reasonable level, in particular through training for the judiciary.”³¹

2.2.4. Professionalism and the lack of clear editorial policies and codes

According to international studies, self-censorship is present in media environments that lack professionalism. Clear codes of conduct and editorial policies in media outlets have been often identified as very important to maintaining media standards and professionalism. In Albania’s media outlets, a newly hired journalist would look in vain to identify his outlet’s Editorial Code or Policy: his/her work contract will most probably not contain any “conscience” clause, whereas the editor (or in a more delicate cases, the owner of the outlet) will have the last say in how a story is covered.

In terms of how the editorial policy is conveyed to them, journalists reported that there is usually no need for express statements as to which issues should be covered and how. Rather, journalists quickly understand which are the “no-go” areas and try to steer clear of them, accommodating their editor’s/media owner’s wishes and adapting to the unofficial editorial policy on how and which stories ought to be covered.³²

As can be imagined, the lack of a hard and fast editorial policy increases the likelihood of self-censorship among journalists. For this reason, the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly’s Resolution 1636/2008 *On Indicators for media in a democracy* urges that “media outlets should have editorial independence from media owners, for instance by agreeing with media owners on codes of conduct for editorial independence, to ensure that media owners do not interfere in daily editorial work or compromise impartial journalism”.³³

2.2.5. Financial sustainability and ownership concentration of the media

Experts in the media in Albania have observed a visible trend towards consolidation of ownership in the field, with each media group establishing its own print and electronic media outlets. Where such consolidation runs contrary to the law, media owners resort to

30. Resolution 2019 (2014), *The honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania*, available at <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewPDF.asp?FileID=21294&lang=en>, page 2, section 5.4 : “[The Assembly] regrets that defamation has not been decriminalised in its entirety as it can still have a chilling effect on journalists and may lead them to practise self-censorship. It therefore calls on the parliament to fully decriminalise defamation, in line with Council of Europe standards.”

31. European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, *Albania 2014 Progress Report accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council*, op. cit., p. 45.

32. South East European Media Observatory, *Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism*, 2014, op. cit., page 102.

33. Op. cit., paragraph 8.13.

a series of methods of questionable legality to circumvent anti-concentration/competition rules: thus, shares of media outlets are transferred to relatives of the owner, companies are shut down only to reopen under a different name while in some cases shareholders, front men for the real owners, are “recycled” in new companies.³⁴

At the international level, in 2010 the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information on February 3, 2010 adopted a *Declaration on Ten Key Threats to Freedom of Expression*. Tellingly, one of them was commercial pressures on media, consisting among others of growing media concentration.³⁵

International soft-law standards do not prohibit commercial entities from exercising control over different media forms and outlets; rather, the standards provide for states to take measures to prevent such entities from exercising decisive influence over a country’s media market. Thus, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)2 *On media pluralism and diversity of media content*, urges states to adopt rules aimed at “limiting the influence which a single person, company or group may have in one or more media sectors as well as ensuring a sufficient number of diverse media outlets”.

According to the recommendation, these rules should reflect the particular characteristics of the country’s media market and can impose thresholds on a range of issues such as audience share, circulation and so on. At the same time, states should entrust competent bodies with monitoring observance of these rules as well as with the authority to adopt measures against the concentration of media in the hands of a few commercial entities, among others by imposing sanctions, by refusing to grant merger requests and so forth. States should also promote research into media concentration and promote public debate on this issue.³⁶

2.2.6. Market Pressures: The role of state advertising

Albania’s media advertising market is small, dominated by a few major telecom companies and the state. Abuse of state advertising for political purposes constitutes an invidious form of soft censorship: state authorities might use state advertising contracts to punish or reward media outlets for criticizing or praising respectively state policies or officials. Such censorship might be particularly effective (and appealing to governments) in times of economic crisis when, on the one hand, the regular revenue of media outlets drops (making them more reliant on state advertising for financial survival) and on the other, the need to investigate, report on and be critical of ineffective state economic policies increases.

Additionally, in contrast to other forms of soft censorship (e.g. providing inducements to journalists to cover government activities in a favorable light), state advertising is in principle a legitimate activity. Allegations of such practices have also been made in relation to Albania.

34. South East European Media Observatory, Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism, 2014, Chapter on Albania, op. cit., page 77.

35. Available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/41439>

36. The Recommendation is available at <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1089699>

Thus, in 2013, Balkan Insight reported that in 2008 and 2010, the Albanian Council of Ministers awarded advertising contracts for state entities worth hundreds of thousands of euros to TV Klan, a private TV broadcasting station owned by Aleksander Frangaj, a supporter of former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, reportedly as part of a broad scheme to promote pro-government media. According to Balkan Insight, this “understanding” remained in force during the eight years that the centre-right Democratic Party held power.³⁷

Even earlier, however, the OSCE’s Representative on Freedom of the Media reported that one of the topics highlighted during her visit to Albania was “the need to establish a transparent allocation system for state advertising to avoid favoritism.”³⁸ As early as 2002 Human Rights Watch was observing that: “distribution of state advertising is often manipulated for political purposes and, in the worst cases, for outright financial blackmail. A dozen editors-in-chief and media managers from both opposition and unaffiliated media outlets told Human Rights Watch, in separate interviews, that the Albanian government routinely uses advertising to pressure the critical press or interfere with their editorial freedom.”³⁹

According to an OSCE report at the time, on average 45% of advertising space in all dailies was taken up by state advertising.⁴⁰ Although in the subsequent years the importance of state advertising as a source of revenue for newspapers and media outlets decreased, it remains significant: according to monitoring of advertising data for the months April to May for 2008 – 2012, state advertising accounted in general for more than 10% of the monitored newspapers’ revenue; indeed, in relation to one newspaper, *Koha Jone*, the percentage was almost 30%, prompting the researchers to note: “Even though *Koha Jone* doesn’t have highest sales volume, it has highest state-led advertising revenue with 29.2% of total revenue in the past five years.”⁴¹

More recently, in October 2014, PACE called on Albania to ensure that government advertising is not awarded to media outlets on the basis of their political affiliation.⁴² In its report accompanying the resolution, PACE also noted that during the Monitoring Committee’s fact-finding visit in Albania in June 2014, some of its interlocutors noted that the channeling of state advertising to media that supported the government increased pressure by media owners on journalists and editorial staff to tone down criticism of the ruling coalition, ostensibly in order for them to be able to benefit from state advertising.⁴³

37. See report *Soft Censorship, Hard Impact*, produced by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), published on 2 June 2014, available in English at <http://www.wan-ifra.org/articles/2014/06/02/just-published-soft-censorship-hard-impact>, page 10. See also article by BesarLikmeta, *Big Advertisers subvert Albanian Media Freedom*, *Balkan Insight*, 20 December 2013, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/big-advertisers-subvert-albanian-media-freedom>

38. *2012 Yearbook of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media*, OSCE, 2013, available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/104366>, page 59.

39. Human Rights Watch, *Albania: the Cost of Speech – violations of media freedom in Albania*, 2002, available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/albania/albania0602.pdf> page 48.

40. Ibid.

41. Assist.Prof.Dr.YükselKöksal, İldaİsuf, *An Analysis of the Printed Newspaper Advertising in Albania*, IJINT (International Journal of Science, Innovation and New Technology), Feb 2013, available at http://ijsint.org/documents/IJSINT_Feb2013/IJSINT_Feb2013_04.pdf, page 4. The other six newspapers monitored as part of the survey were G. Shqiptare, Shekulli, Panorama, Korrieri, G. Shqip and MAPO.

42. Resolution 2019 (2014), *The honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania*, op. cit, page 2.

43. PACE, Report: *The honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania*, September 2014, available at <http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewPDF.asp?FileID=21068&lang=en>, paragraph 55.

3. METHODOLOGY

In light of the objectives to establish a better understanding of the level, factors and mechanisms of self-censorship in the media in Albania, this report engages in an analysis of the key factors that create an environment conducive toward self-censorship based on the perceptions of practitioners in the field – via both quantitative and qualitative research.

The authors of this study first conducted a thorough literature review. This was important in order to better understand the causes, forms and consequences that self-censorship may have, to identify previous research undertaken in different countries on self-censorship, as well as to better operationalize the variables based in the Albanian context.

The second step of the research process was the design of the methodology. Based on the existing literature, the methodology of the research was developed through detailing the sample, the procedures, the instruments and the way in which the data would be analyzed. The methodology of the research was designed in collaboration with independent experts and a special focus was given throughout the process on the representation of men and women in the sampling, as well as the geographical distribution of the participants.

Previous studies on the media in Albania, along with global considerations from international studies on self-censorship, discussed above, have served to inform the surveying instrument and the moderation guide for qualitative research with journalists and editors.

The questionnaire contained 14 questions (including three open ones) and was organized around five sections: media environment in Albania, the situation of the respondent's media, media professionals' rights, avoidance of news in the media, and personal experience of news avoidance.

Questions initially probed assessments of the situation in the media overall, gradually moving to an assessment of the situation in the media outlet of respondents, then inquiring about the respondents' personal experiences. An interview guide was developed along the lines of the questionnaire. Its more flexible and semi-structured format, composed by open questions, was intended to provide for more in-depth discussion, and to particularly bring out potential solutions and recommendations that interlocutors could identify.

In total, the perceptions of 121 journalists and editors were collected via both open and closed questions in a face-to-face survey, while in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 media practitioners and experts from several non-governmental organizations working in media development.

The survey and the in-depth interviews were conducted during November and December 2014.

The sampling methodology was quasi-random; including different groups in terms of title, type of media, level of experience, and whether the media is local or national⁴⁴. Out of 121 respondents, three-quarters were journalists (88) and a quarter were editors, editors-in-

44. In terms of coverage rather than strictly referring to type of media license.

chief, and directors (32) (Figure 1). About half of the group came from the broadcasting media, while a third came from newspapers – and a group of respondents was engaged by more than one type of media (11%) (Figure 2).

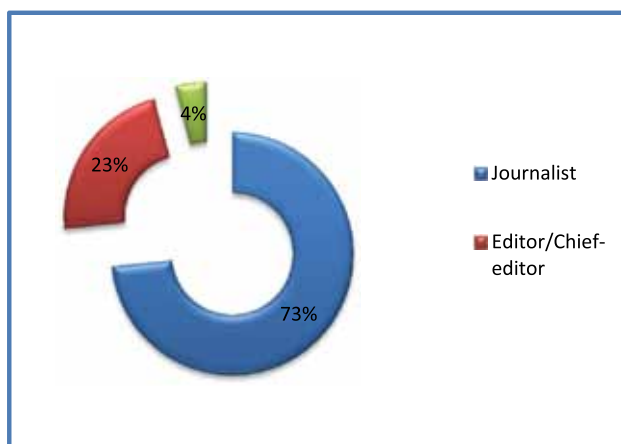


Figure 1: Job title

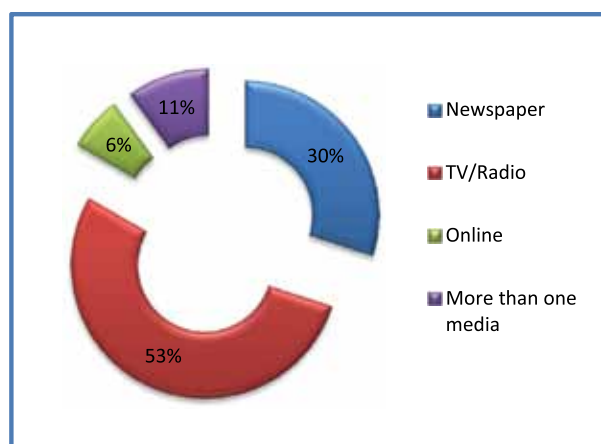


Figure 2: Media type

About two-thirds of respondents (63%) work for national media (74), while 37% (44) work for local media (Figure 3). This percentage does not automatically reflect the geographical distribution of the participants, as some participants from outside the capital work as correspondents for national media outlets. Based on the geographical distribution, half of the participants work in the capital, while the other half work in other districts. The group is very experienced; more than 40% of respondents have more than 10 years of experience. Half of the respondents have three to 10 years' experience (Figure 4).

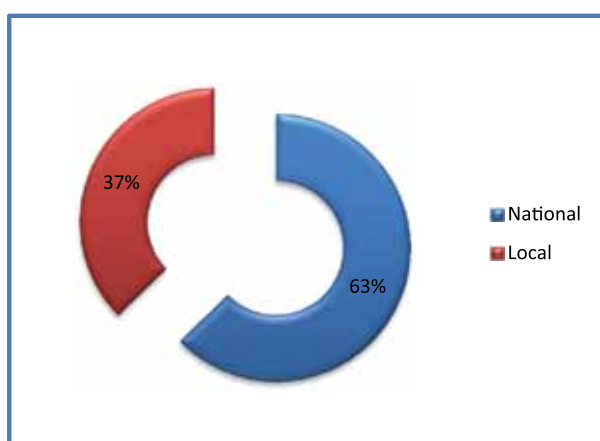


Figure 3: National vs. Local

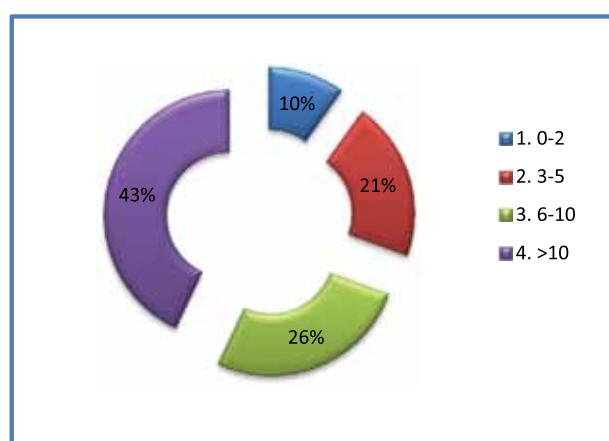


Figure 4: Years of experience

Twenty-two (22) in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists (9), editors, editors-in-chief and directors (10), and experts in media affairs from civil society (3). A significant majority of interviewees have above six – and many above ten – years of experience in the sector. Of the interviewees, 12 work in the capital while ten work in other districts of the country.

After the data-gathering and preliminary analysis, a workshop was organized to present and validate findings and recommendations. In the workshop, all the main actors as listed above participated and each was encouraged to give feedback on the findings and recommendations, which have been included in this final report.

4. FINDINGS - ROOTS, CAUSES AND PRACTICES OF SELF-CENSORSHIP IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

The roots, causes and practices of self-censorship are divided into three main broad categories, which include: direct or indirect external pressure on a media organization; pressure inside a media organization; or the assimilation of certain organizational values by journalists themselves.⁴⁵

With the set goal of exploring the perceptions of Albanian media professionals in regard to these important aspects, this chapter summarizes the quantitative and qualitative findings based on the data collected through the questionnaires and field interviews. The findings of this study are divided into three main sections:

- 1) Media professionals' perceptions of the media environment in Albania. This section summarizes the perceptions of media professionals participating in this study as regards direct and indirect external pressure factors toward media organizations. The findings are categorized into three subsections: a) media situation in Albania; b) main factors and actors influencing its quality; and c) main challenges faced by Albanian journalists.
- 2) Perceived influence of the media environment on editorial policies. This section summarizes the perceptions of media professionals participating in this study related to pressure factors inside the media organization they work for. The findings are categorized into five subsections: a) existence of a written editorial policy; b) factors influencing editorial policy; c) main actors shaping editorial policies; d) presentation of editorial policy; and e) the role of editorial policy on media coverage.
- 3) Frequency and practices of self-censorship. This section summarizes the perceptions of media professionals participating in this study related to the frequency and practices of self-censorship due to the influence of the above factors and the assimilation of certain organizational values by journalists. The findings are categorized into four subsections: a) frequency of news avoidance; b) news/stories mostly avoided; c) who takes the decision to avoid the news; and d) examples of cases of self-censorship among Albanian journalists.

4.1. Media professionals' perceptions on Media Environment in Albania

In the literature review on self-censorship practices across the world, it is widely accepted that the media environment inside a specific country plays an important role in the presence and spread of self-censorship. Generally, self-censorship is associated with media environments that are not free, where there are laws restricting media freedom, like defamation, libel

45. Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Honk-Kong, The Harvard Journal of Press/Politics 1998 <http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/3/2/55>

or draconian national security laws. The fear of facing criminal charges based on a strict national security law has been cited as one of the reasons inducing reporters and editors toward self-censorship in many countries. However, self-censorship is not only present where there are authoritarian regimes that restrict media freedom. It has also been documented as widespread in countries like the United States, which is a democracy and has a free and vibrant media market with liberal libel laws. Self-censorship has also been associated with threats and harassments toward journalists, media ownership concentration, market pressures and poor working conditions for media professionals.

According to a review of secondary data on the media situation in Albania, in some cases more than others these negative factors are part of the media environment. However, because self-censorship is associated with the personal experiences of journalists, the perceptions of media professionals of the main challenges the media faces and the macro factors that restrict its freedom are important. For this reason, in order to identify Albanian journalists and editors' perceptions of these external inducing factors toward self-censorship, this study enlisted their opinions on the main challenges that the Albanian media faces today, the main factors and actors that influence the media environment as well as their perceptions of the challenges faced by journalists.

4.1.1. Media situation in Albania

In order to identify the media professionals' perception of the media environment in Albania, both participants in the survey and the key informants that were interviewed face-to-face were asked through an open question to look at the big picture of the media situation and list the most important issues or challenges that the media face.

The opinions gathered through this question were diverse, particularly in regard to their assessment of the quality of the media in Albania, where the respondents focus mainly on the identification of the challenges facing the media and the factors that affect it negatively.

However, in some cases, the respondents did identify positive factors that have contributed to the development of the Albanian media in the last two decades.

In this framework, despite the many problems the media faces in Albania, some respondents underlined the progress made during the last two decades following the collapse of the communist regime. In this regard, respondents have linked the development of the free press in the last two decades with the country's tumultuous transition to democracy, underlining that progress in the media scene has been closely associated with progress in the socio-political and economic environment in the country.

The media situation in Albania reflects the level of society in general. We live in a period where we left behind the transition [to democracy] only a few years ago. Like any country that goes through a period of transition, society and the media are as a result a bit chaotic. The Albanian media is chaotic, in a somewhat desperate attempt to impose rules. However, without doubt it is better that it was. Media in Albania are more professional than before, more democratic than before. Maybe it's more deceptive than before, but this is a sign of its maturity. It's an unavoidable evolutionary process. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

Other factors mentioned as positive aspects in the media environment in Albania are the lack of politically motivated physical attacks against journalists in the last few years and

the large diversity of outlets and media formats. The increase in the number of outlets is identified as an outlet for a diversity of views, mainly as regards opposite political views or reporting angles on an event. In another perspective the explosion of online and social media is seen as a possibility to freely express opinions and stances by professional journalists who would be otherwise censored or become victim of self-censorship in the mainstream media. However, despite the diversity of views, the respondents underline that the media in Albania are not free to report objectively on events and stories but are forced to be biased and choose sides by the conditions present in the socio-economic environment. The practice of quality investigative reporting by a number of online media outlets is seen also as an impetus for the mainstream media to dig deeper into stories.

So, if we take into account 'pro and against the government,' I believe both sides have their fair share. Although the balance has changed lately (meaning government and opposition do not split the media in half), I still don't see this as a problem. There is a diversity of opinions. – Media expert

There is hope with the rise of social media. The blogs, created mainly by journalists, are a throwback to the beginning of the free media in Albania in the early Nineties, when journalists were also owners of the print press. We have today a virtual media or online media that is implementing a qualitative genre of journalism like investigative journalism. This encourages going deeper with reporting and creating models inside the journalistic community in the mainstream media that suffers from self-censorship. - Media expert

Also, another positive aspects underlined by respondents and key informants has been the improvement and completion of the media legal framework, and in this regard particularly on the ownership and concentration of electronic media and the decriminalization of defamation. However, it is noted that the regulatory framework is generally regarded as lacking implementation or is incomplete in terms of defending the rights of journalists.

If you view the Albanian media market you will notice that the legislation is well regulated; however, none of these laws is implemented with institutional accuracy. - Media expert

Although the above-mentioned aspects have been identified as having a positive effect in the Albanian media, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire as well as the key informants interviewed underlined the negative aspects that affect this sector when asked to provide a panoramic view of the media environment in Albania.

An analysis of their answers shows that media professionals perceive the Albanian media today as not independent because of political and economic pressures, financial incapacity, lack of professionalism and professional ethics, as well as violations of the rights of journalists.

The respondents believe that all the above-mentioned factors push entire newsrooms of journalists towards censorship and the practice of self-censorship.

When I was a journalist dozens of times I faced censorship from my editors for news I brought to my TV or newspaper newsroom. Dozens of times as an editor I faced the desperation of my journalists after I censored news they produced. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

There are certain cases when it is apparent that the media has lost its independence. This is due to the links of a media director or owner to politicians, due to his/her financial dependence on them. Many media owners but also directors have contractual relationships with the state, or

indirect financial relationships, and this makes the media lose its independence. This is the main problem that induces newspapers and heads of newsrooms to censorship and self-censorship. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

All these negative factors are believed to have added to public mistrust of the media. Most respondents to this study underline that due to the above-mentioned problems the Albanian media is failing to fulfill its mission to inform and educate as a pillar of a democratic society.

I think the media in Albania are free but not independent. They are free to say what they think but they are not independent to be objective. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

Despite the perceived importance of the negative factors in overall media quality, all the negative factors identified through this question by the media professionals will be presented in more detail in the lower sections of this chapter, where the participants are asked to assess in a quantitative and qualitative way the impact of each of these factors on the scene, as well as their role in the existence of self-censorship in the Albanian context.

4.1.2. Main factors/actors influencing the quality of media in Albania

To better evaluate the role of the factors and actors identified through the open question, the participants in the survey were asked to assess the level of influence of a number of key indicators, which were identified through the literature review.

The respondents were asked to assess the influence on media quality of: i) owners' links with politics, ii) owners' economic interests, iii) pressure by state advertising, iv) pressure by public institutions, v) pressure by large advertisers, and vi) financial insufficiency.⁴⁶

The level of influence was assessed on a 5-point scale, from "no influence" (1) to "very influential" (5).⁴⁷

The results of the survey show that the vast majority of respondents to the questionnaire assess all of these factors to be influential, with mean scores ranging between 3 and 4.3, i.e. between "somewhat" and "significantly influential".

However, the emphasis is on media **owners' finances and links to politics**.

Owners' economic interests, the media's financial insufficiency, and owners' links to politics are assessed as the main factors influencing media quality, with more than 75% of those surveyed believing that these three factors are significantly or very influential (Figure 5).

A similar overview of the factors that influence media quality in Albania emerges also from the interviews of key informants, which also list the three above-mentioned factors as key

Factor	Mean
Financial insufficiency	4.3
Owner's economic interests	4.3
Owner's links with politics	4.1
Pressure by state advertising	3.5
Pressure by large advertisers	3.2
Pressure by public institutions	3.0

46. While some of these factors are subcategories of types of influence, they were included in order to get further insight into the mechanisms of political or economic influence that journalists see as most at play.

47. Note that respondents were not asked to rank the influence of each factor.

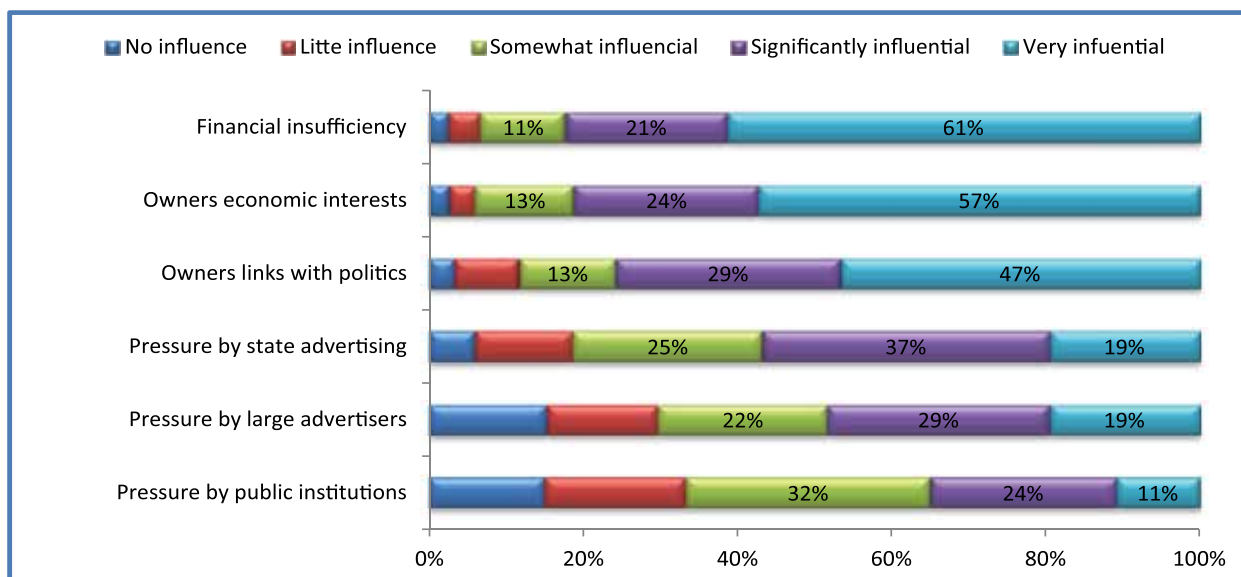


Figure 5: How would you assess the influence of each of these factors, which may influence the quality of media in Albania?

determinants of media quality. Such factors are perceived by key informants that were interviewed for this study not only as important but also as closely associated with each other.

According to respondents, the Albanian media **lack financial independence** and are unable to generate revenues that cover their costs, which means that most outlets owe their existence to financial transfers made by other businesses controlled by the same owner. In these cases, such media outlets are tied to the economic interests of the owners, often in heavily regulated industries, which makes them prone to political pressure and interference. In the few cases where owners do not have other business interests they are still dependent on public advertising or on sponsorship for their survival.

Thus, the media today is a means of enrichment and no longer a means of information. – Media director, Tirana

The existing panorama in the Albanian media market is such that parts of the mass communication outlets support the left and some support the right. Why does this happen? Because in the period when the Albanian media flourished, the owners had economic interests linked with the parties in power. Almost all the media in Albania have served as support for other businesses, like construction, transportation, fuel, food, coffee and alcoholic beverages. Others that do not have this sort of access have connections with the government to secure advertising and sponsorships in order to survive. From the other side, politics has also exerted pressure on the media in order to line up in accordance with its interests. - Journalist, Elbasan

In almost half of the cases and regardless of their position in the hierarchy, interviewees are explicit about the so-called **“Bermuda triangle”** where journalism disappears: politics-business-media. Many responses to the question about the media’s main problems focus on the instrumentalisation of the media by businesses and politics to serve their own ends. Two main directions of pressure are depicted, either separately or in combination: 1) Businesses open media outlets as a way of procuring concessionary licenses or public contracts by offering those in power favorable coverage or threatening them with smear campaigns, and/

or 2) Parties in power subjugate media outlets and journalistic freedom through abuse of power (concessions, public contracts, tax authorities, etc).

What we have noticed during the last few years is the spread of the model businessman/ media owner, who also has other linked interests. Because of the way Albanian society works, in order to secure these interests, the media owner is also closely tied with politics and in this case the media is simply a lever or a means for blackmail in order to secure the economic interests of the owner. – Media expert

Media is the owner's weapon and journalists are that weapon's bullets. – Editor, Tirana

The findings above largely match with what media commentators and previous studies have highlighted as regards the lack of clear demarcation between media, business and politics, and between party politics and use of state resources to influence the public by use of the media as a propaganda tool. Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged in previous studies that media owners have substantive and diverse non-media business holdings, which largely subsidize the media business⁴⁸.

The reported collusion of economic and political interests against media freedom finds support in an analysis of the structure and legal regime of **media ownership**. While there are no restrictions on the ownership of print media, political parties, state authorities, banks and economic institutions are legally barred from ownership of broadcast media. However, according to the interviews with key informants, rather than ownership, lack of transparency in the media finances remains the key problem assessed as influencing media quality in Albania.

The lack of financing or the lack of transparency of the financial sources of the heads of the media is one of the main problems, which affects not only professionalism but also the outlet's condition/ state. Due to its financing, the media in Albania is ruled by politics, the government or large companies, which dictate its editorial policy. Every day that passes we see the media become a mirror of the interests of the people who directly or indirectly finance it. – Editor, Tirana

The perceived influence of three other factors that were evaluated, namely **state advertising**, **large private advertising**, and **public institutions' pressure** from the participants is also high, but lower than the previous three factors mentioned above. At least half of respondents believe that these factors are significant or very influential. This suggests that **state advertising** is perceived to be important, but the economic interests of media owners are largely tied to other non-media businesses that they control rather than their media outlets, which could benefit from state advertising.

Nevertheless, many of the interviewed key informants report that state adverts in many cases are used as a means of pressure for censorship in media outlets. Such pressure is favored by the lack of a clear regulatory framework on the distribution of state advertising by institutions and public agencies.

What we have noticed is that the regulatory framework in terms of state advertising is unclear. Even when a regulation exists it is not implemented in practice. For example, a few years ago a decision of the Council of Ministers was issued that spelled out that state advertising would be

48. Media Sustainability Index 2014, Albania, op. cit., page 13 and South East European Media Observatory, *Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism*, 2014, op. cit., pages 72 – 76.

distributed to the three biggest media outlets, but in Albania there is no way to measure this. There is no exact way to measure circulation. The same is true for TV. – Media expert

Like state advertising, **corporate advertisers** are also deemed to have an influence on the quality of media reporting, but still less than owner's economic and political interests. According to the key informants that were interviewed the reason behind this is that big advertisers in Albania do not usually influence all the editorial output of the media outlet, but restrict themselves to lack of negative coverage or to PR for their own products and services, without interfering with editorial policy as a whole.

We don't have verifiable data on how much private companies spend on media advertising or on specific media outlets, although a perception has been created that they keep some media standing on their feet. However, they don't have a problem in distributing some advertising to each and every media, in order to be OK with their coverage. This often translates into articles and coverage that is simply PR for these companies. Otherwise, negative articles are nowhere to be seen, apart from cases when they are used as blackmail to seek advertising. According to available data, state advertising has a smaller share of the market, and such companies have more influence. – Media expert

It is also to be reported that pressure on the editorial policies by large advertisers is assessed at similar levels to the **pressure from public institutions** such as the police and tax authorities, supporting concerns about the political use of state institutions to both induce and coerce media outlets.

There are cases of political pressure, usually when the party in power exerts its influence on the media in various forms, like boycotts of its TV shows, lack of government advertising or attacks from the tax office. This has happened in many cases in the last few years, which have been made public. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

Apart from the importance of the above-mentioned factors on the quality of the media, during the interviews a number of important differences were identified about their influence on local and national media outlets.

As it turned out, **financial insufficiency** is a more important factor in terms of influence on the quality of the local media when compared to national outlets, for which the advertising market is bigger and more diverse. Because local media outlets have a restricted advertising market, the pressure from institutional and political factors is perceived as much higher, especially pressure coming from local government, which curtails these outlets' independence.

There is a difference between local and national media, which is that local media are de facto bankrupt. There is indifference from advertisers on the local level and lack of support from different donors. No local media are solvent. – Journalist, Elbasan

In Shkodra, there are three MPs who keep open three local media, which means the influence of politics on the local media is very strong. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

The intervention of heads of local institutions (for example the mayor, the prefect and others), thanks to their connections with the owners, has a negative influence on the editorial policy and in news writing. – Journalist, Shkodra

4.1.3. Challenges faced by journalists

The factors that are identified above generally relate to the overall operation of the media sector and are usually interpreted as factors in the “external” environment of journalists’ and editors’ everyday work.

As underlined above, the media’s reputation and quality is assessed to be affected also by the **level of professionalism and ethics of media professionals**, namely journalists and editors. However, the lack of professionalism and the ethics in the Albanian media is generally identified by key informants in this study as a consequence of interrelated external factors, such as economic and political pressure or poor working condition or the lack of physical and job security, violation of journalists’ rights and lack of protection of them from institutions.

The main problem in the media today relates to the salaries of those who work in the media. According to trustworthy studies, 90 per cent of journalists in TV and newspapers are either not paid or are paid late for their work. This is the main problem, survival. A journalist who does not get paid will produce bad journalism. Media is a profession but also a passion. However, a journalist cannot feed his children with passion. At max, he/she can feed his/her illusions and frustration. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

To further investigate the factors directly related to the working conditions of journalists in Albania, this time, journalists and editors were asked through the questionnaire to rate the situation that media professionals experience in the media market.

Respondents were asked to assess: professionalism; pay and job security; working conditions (workload and resources); motivation and professional development; physical safety and professional integrity; rights of journalists and their protection - on a 5-point scale from “very positive” to “very negative”.

The results to this question show a discouraging situation for the journalistic profession. More than 80% of the respondents assess the “pay and job security” and “protection of rights” situation in the Albanian media to be negative or very negative. The situation with “work

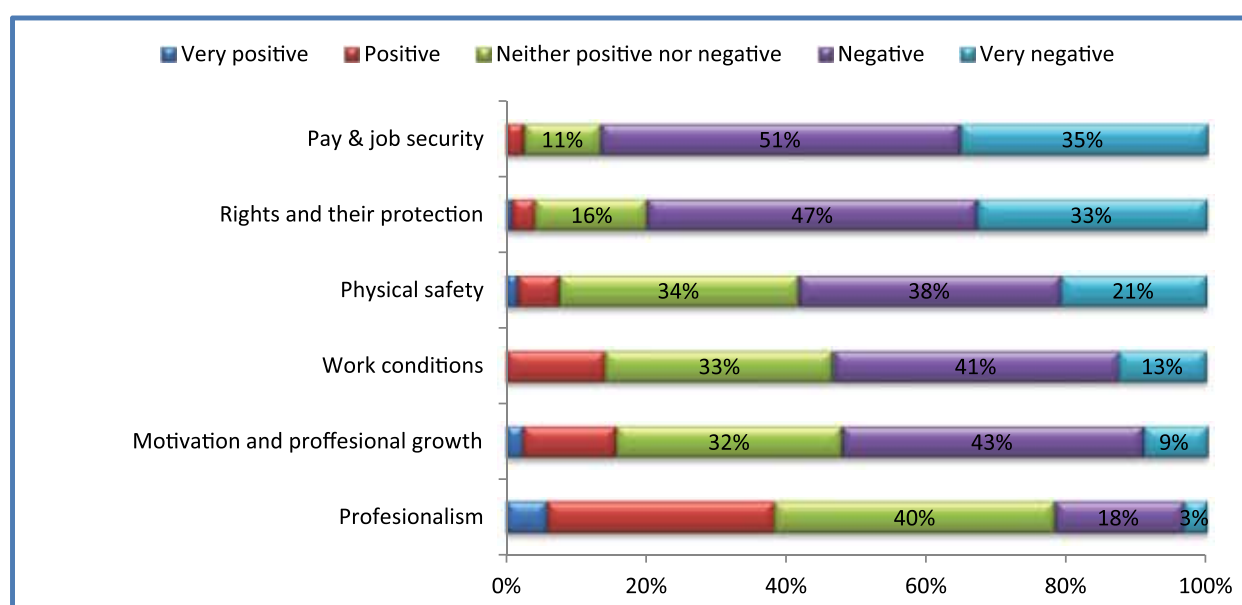


Figure 6: How do you assess the current situation of Albanian media in regards to the following aspects?

conditions”, “motivation and professional development”, and “physical safety and integrity” is seen as negative or very negative by over half of the respondents. Among the different statements, only professionalism is assessed positively, with only around 21% assessing the level of professionalism of journalists in Albanian media to be negative or very negative (Figure 6).

Similarly, the mean scores can be calculated for another indication of the overall assessment of each factor. As depicted in Figure 7, the results show that respondents as a whole assess “pay and job security”, along with “protection of rights” and “physical and professional safety” as highly negative. The situation of “work conditions” and “motivation and growth” is also seen as negative but less so. Respondents as a whole assess professionalism to be neither positive nor negative in the current media situation in the country.

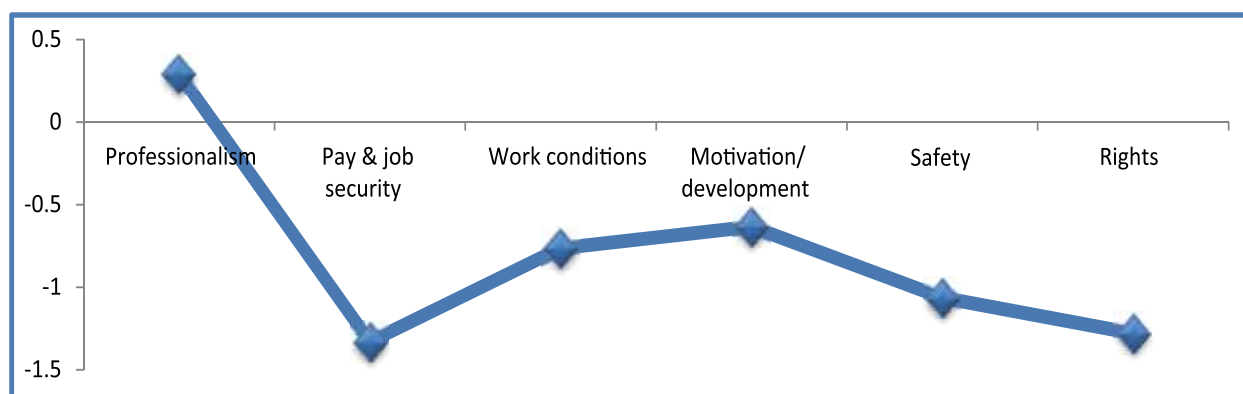


Figure 7: Mean score

While professionalism is the only indicator that is not rated negatively in the responses to the survey, in the in-depth interviews with key informants, respondents are torn on the issue. About half speak of low levels of professionalism, while others either do not mention it, or assess it positively. The respondents identify professionalism and ethics as important traits of journalists who resist pressure from owners and editors and subsequently do not practice self-censorship.

Factor	Mean
Pay & job security	-1.3
Rights	-1.3
Safety	-1.1
Work conditions	-0.8
Motivation/development	-0.6
Professionalism	0.3

In my point of view, there are some journalists that have understood the media's mission and live by it. These journalists are less exposed to self-censorship and less exposed to the effects that the conflict of interests of the owner/publisher or the media's director have on the newsroom. But there is also another group of journalists who have selected journalism just as place to work, for whom the mission of journalism is completely secondary. This is a problem for journalism, because if there is pressure from the top down, this type of journalist is very much prone to pressure. A professionally fulfilled journalist who has ethics and has the mission of journalism in focus is likely to resist pressure from media owners/heads and not accept self-censorship. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

Key informants blame media owners for the **low number of skilled journalists** in the Albanian media, arguing the journalists with poor skills are easily censored or induced toward self-censorship. Respondents have elaborated on the reasons for the low levels of

professionalism, linking it above all to the choices of owners. Respondents claim that there is no interest in professionals; the young and inexperienced are deliberately chosen over media professionals as they are easier “soldiers” and more likely to endure minimum pay and conform to the owner’s demands.

Professionalism again is tied with the media owners. The media is a business and owners do not seek good journalists, qualitative and qualified, who are difficult to cross, to order and to fire. Owners are not looking for quality and there are no institutions above them to enforce it.
– Media expert.

It is in the interests of media owners not to have professional journalists, not only because they have to pay them well but because ... professional ones are not in their interest. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

Other reasons identified by key informants for the low levels of professionalism include the **poor offer of education in journalism**, as well as **lack of professional development activities and motivation**. The lack of long tradition of a free press is also identified as problem, with some respondents underlining that journalism is still not respected as a profession. The key informants also identified as a problem the lack of professional training for local media journalists outside Tirana. Even when such training is available, interviewees stated that often they are detached from the reality that journalists face every day.

Regarding tradition and professionalism in journalism, we have many shortcomings inherited mainly from communism, when there was no journalism but propaganda. Also the school of journalism, which was closed in the 1970s and reopened in 1990, has not traced a clear path, despite progress in its curricula. We are still in the embryonic stage and a lot of work is necessary to build the image and the tradition of a respected profession. – Media expert.

The journalists we have are not qualified professionally. In the city of Shkodra there is a lack of training and conferences for journalists and the only way is to learn from other journalists and the editor at our media. – Journalist, Shkodra

Training is very important for journalists and they are very much interested in it. However, they present laboratory settings, far from real-world situations. When journalists go back to their jobs, they face the same situation. – Media expert

Also, almost all the interviewees considered that the low level of professionalism is directly related to the **poor working conditions** that the media sector offers. Work conditions are largely assessed to be dire and insecure, marked by low, delayed and insecure payments and lack of work contracts as required by law.

It means that taxes are paid on basis of the minimum wage, while the rest of the salary is paid in cash. It means that you have no day off and get no paid sick leave. These problems usually affect journalists. A journalist is not a journalist because he/she deserves it but because the owner decides to make you one. One day, if the owner so decides, he can pick a student from journalism department and you will be replaced. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

Albanian journalists are overloaded. To fill two pages of a newspaper everyday with news is a large load that affects quality, not to mention the labor code, which is not respected at all. We work six days a week, official holidays are not paid, while days off are not 21 days every year as the labor code spells out. – Journalist, Tirana.

Many respondents assert that it is impossible to remain a good professional under conditions of **pressure from the owners and politicians** and in precarious employment conditions.

Working conditions and job security are lacking, as a 'status' for the profession is lacking, while the law is not implemented, because journalists in 80 per cent of the cases work on the black market, unprotected from the pressures they face. They are easily abandoned for a 'higher interest' by the media they serve or the owners. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra.

Another factor affecting professionalism is **lack of resources**, leading to overload and avoidance of news that is costly to follow. This typically includes investigative and stories in areas that are difficult to reach.

Understandably, much news is avoided. The Albanian media has very little in-depth reporting, few investigations. The pressure of time is decisive for the journalist. – Journalist, Tirana.

Apart from the lack of employment security, **physical security** is another concern that emerges in the interviews, especially – though not exclusively – among journalists who work on the crime beat, on political news and especially those working in local media outside Tirana. Respondents claim direct pressure or threats from those affected by the news they follow, including officials and politicians, and demands to owners to fire the journalist who has trampled on their interests. No protection of any sort is reported.

Journalists have no job security, particularly outside the capital. They are threatened while carrying their duties; they are not protected by the police or by the directors and media owners where they serve. It has happened often that officials or people with political influence have intervened with media owners in order to fire journalists, simply because they have stepped on their interests. The job of a journalist is difficult, because organized crime, political power and businesses, are closely connected, and if you hit at a segment of this chain the other reacts. – Journalist, Elbasan

Physical insecurity is another factor that lowers the performance of journalists, particularly when hotspots are reported and the journalist becomes exposed with no one protecting their rights. There are cases where news is avoided, particularly when the security of a journalist is violated. In other cases the journalist has difficulty to reach and report on the news event due to a lack of infrastructure. – Editor, Elbasan.

According to the key informants interviewed for this study, part of the problems associated with professionalism and ethics, as well as physical security are the result of the **lack of self-regulating mechanisms**, of an association of journalists or unions in the media sector. The respondents report that despite several attempts in the last few years to create self-regulating mechanisms, they have failed due to lack of solidarity and motivation among journalists.

The community of journalists in Albania has individuals with high professional qualities and standards; however, these individuals are not able to create a union and do not have an entity that can react professionally for self-regulation and informality issues. This draws on a lack of faith that professionalism can overcome the authority of the media owners. – Media expert

4.2. Perceived influence of media environment on editorial policies

The first section of this chapter summarized the perceptions that journalists, editors and key informants have of the media environment in general in Albania, in order to identify the presence of external pressures, often associated with self-censorship. In this second section, we focus on the specific media organizations that the respondents are part of.

Questions inquire about factors and actors influencing their editorial policy, as well as the extent to which editorial policy determines forms of coverage or news avoidance. Lastly, information on written guiding editorial documents and work contracts is gathered to assess how editorial policy is used and communicated, and whether work contracts coexist with “partial” informality (contracts that do not reflect real work conditions).

The factors that journalists and editors face inside a media organization are important indicators for the study of self-censorship, because self-censorship not only occurs on an individual level of the journalist and editor but also in the context of an entire media organization. The practice of self-censorship inside a media organization is associated with pressure exerted on journalists to avoid certain type of news or topics, but also due to the assimilation of certain values of the organization by the media professional. Through the cues and direct or indirect orders, journalists overtime assimilate what is permissible and not allowed to be reported in specific media organization, a process that is often referred to as newsroom socialization.

4.2.1. Presence of written editorial policies

The media in Albania do not seem to operate on written editorial policy documents. More than half of respondents (65%) are not aware of a written editorial policy in their media outlet. None of the respondents of the in-depth interviews attest to written editorial policies either.

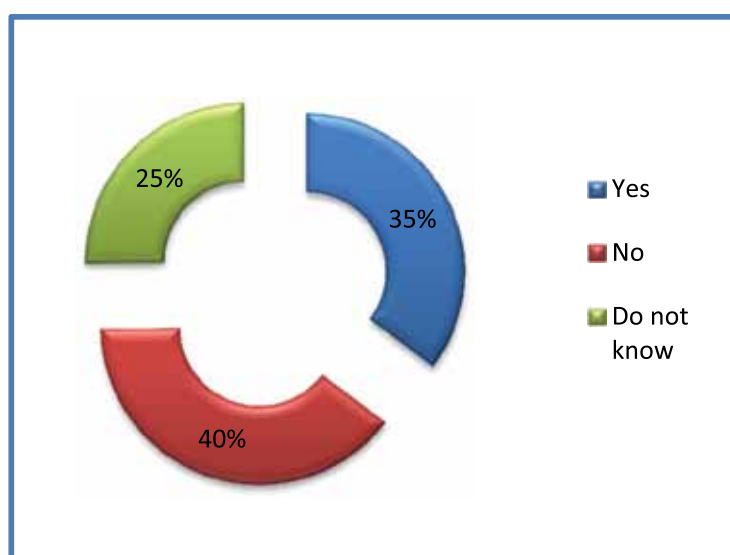


Figure 8: Does your media have a written editorial policy?

This confirms previous views that editorial policy is rarely written or directly conveyed, but is rather understood via the identification of “no-go” areas in what can be covered and how⁴⁹.

49. South East European Media Observatory, *Media integrity matters – Reclaiming public service values in media and journalism*, 2014, op. cit., page 102.

To my knowledge there is no actual study in this direction, but from different interviews that we have done, media do not have a clear and written editorial policy, considering that this depends from the interests of the owner, political shifts, etc. For this reason, editorial policy is not transparent. However, often because of clear positions taken by the media on political issues, not only journalists but also the public has a grasp of their editorial direction. There are those who know before they start working in a media and those who make 'mistakes' and learn on the way, or a combination of both. I am not aware of any written editorial policies. – Media expert

Before presenting other detailed finding in this section related to the factors and actors influencing the editorial policy inside a media outlet, the channels and the procedures used for its presentation to the media professionals, as well as the role of editorial policy in news coverage and avoidance, it is essential to present the perceived definition of an editorial policy for the participants in this study. Through the interviews under this section on the definition and role of the editorial policy of a media in the Albanian context, although unwritten, it is important to underline that editorial policy is perceived by the majority of respondents as connected only with the selection of the political angle of the news, sidestepping important aspects related to the quality and standards of reporting.

The majority of newspapers and media that are currently in the market have zero editorial policies. An editorial policy means defending the interests of the public, while here the only policy is the support of the government. The way you defend these interests, the scheme you follow, accounts for an editorial policy. The moment you put the media in the service of high state functionaries and the government, you don't have an editorial policy anymore. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

4.2.2. Factors influencing the editorial policy of a media organization

Through the questionnaire the respondents in this study were asked more directly about the editorial policy of the media they work for in order to identify the factors that shape it.

Analysis of the data collected show that journalists believe that the influence on editorial policy of economic and political interests of owners, as well as of external pressures, is high. Newsworthiness and competition for audience are also perceived to be crucial factors in determining what media outlets cover and what they avoid.

Respondents were asked to assess the influence of a number of factors on their own media's editorial policy, on a 5-point scale from no influence, to very influential. The factors were grouped in five categories: 1). Owners' economic interests, 2). Owners' political interests/affiliation, 3). newsworthiness, 4). competition for audience, and 5). pressure/interventions from external actors.

The influence attached to all of these factors by respondents is very high. Mean scores show that on average, all factors are assessed to be between "somewhat influential" and "significantly influential" by more than 50% of respondents (Figure 9).

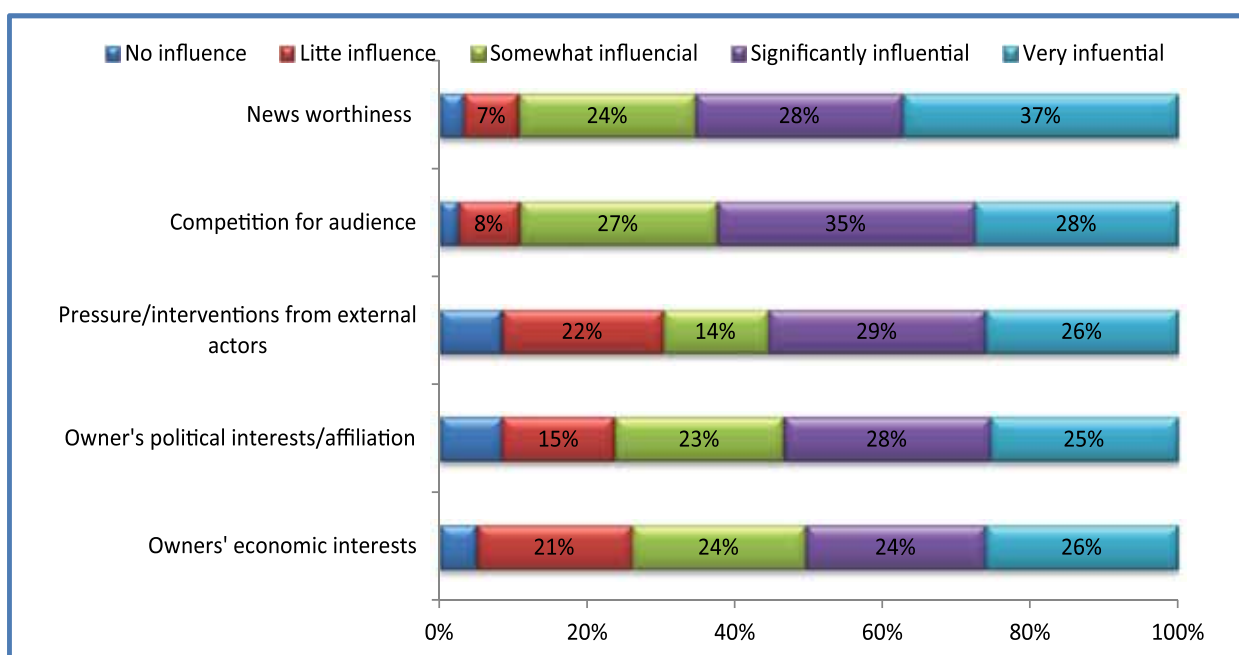


Figure 9: How much do the following factors influence the editorial policy of the media you work for?

These results are similar to the responses on the factors impacting on the overall media market in the country, suggesting that respondents do not consider their media outlet to be different or operating under different conditions from the rest of the media market.

Based on the standards of journalism, newsworthiness and competition for audience should be the two main factors that shape the editorial policy of a media outlet, with the first attached to the media's mission to inform the public and the second to its need to reach a wider audience in order to generate revenue from sales and advertising.

However, the data emerging from the survey suggest that inside Albanian media organizations, owners' interests and political affiliations as well as pressure from external actors are equally important. Their outsized influence as factors shaping editorial policy can be explained by the media outlet's financial insufficiency, which was identified as commonplace, particularly in the local media outside Tirana. In a media environment with a small advertising market, where outlets are used to support the other non-media economic interests of media owners, competitive forces and newsworthiness will not have the same importance in shaping editorial policy that exists in larger and better functioning markets.

The picture emerging on this issue from the interviews with key informants, where respondents were asked to indicate themselves what they thought the main determinants of editorial policy in the media outlet they work for were, is more complex. The overwhelming answer is **the owner's interests and political links**. In a majority of cases, the owner's political links are depicted as a function of business interests.

Factor	Mean
News worthiness	3.9
Competition for audience	3.8
Owners' economic interests	3.5
Pressure/interventions from external actors	3.4
Owner's political interests/affiliation	3.4

Overwhelmingly, and regardless of their position in the hierarchy, interviewees are explicit about media control by the collusion of business and political interests. The pressure either way is depicted as irresistible, given the impossibility of financial independence/self-sufficiency of the media. In brief, “political dependence” is used to describe both direct pressure from politics on the media, and media owners’ courtship of politicians to gain favours for their other businesses. There are also a few cases where courtship of those in power is depicted as service of the owner’s own political ambitions. Likewise, few cases are reported of direct ownership of a media outlet by politicians.

The influence in the case of the media that I work for is only from the owner, as far as I know, and is tied to his political and economic affiliation. Our television currently serves the ruling majority, because the owner is an MP of the ruling majority. An investment of the government or a meeting with a minister has priority in all the news editions. – Editor-in-chief

First is the pressure due to politics and finances. Politicians do not any longer exert direct pressure on the media but through the affiliate interests of the media owner. - Media expert

The factors that influence editorial policy are financial motives. Politics use the weakness of the media to subdue and exert control through advertising or access to different economic sectors, with which the media owners are linked. The main actor that influences the editorial policy in the media remains the political factor. – Journalist, Elbasan.

4.2.3. Main actors shaping the editorial policies

For more insight into the mechanisms through which political, economic and competitive interests are mediated, respondents to the survey were also asked to assess the importance of specific actors on the editorial policy of the media they work for (on a 5-point scale from no influence, to very influential). The list consisted of: state/public institutions, political parties, organized crime, big advertisers, and competitor media.

Again, the views expressed on the actors that influence the editorial policy of the outlet that journalists work for are consistent with the views collected on the factors that shape the media environment in general. In similar lines, competition and political parties are seen as most significant, followed by state/public institutions and big advertisers. The direct influence of organized crime on editorial policy is perceived as significant by fewer journalists.

The smaller mean score of organized crime as an actor shaping editorial policy is also ascribed to the fact that the interest of such actors is not related to the whole coverage of a media organization, but more specifically related to cases that might involve the actor per se. Also the pressure exerted on the media by organized crime is reported to be specifically targeted at crime journalists and editors, which also explains its lesser preponderance as a factor among a larger pool of journalists represented in the sample surveyed for this study.

In line with organized crime, big advertisers are identified as a less important actor than political parties in their influence on editorial policy because they normally are concerned only with avoiding negative coverage and only sponsor the publication of PR articles on their products and services, which are mostly associated with pressure exerted on editors and business journalists, rather than the whole editorial team inside a media outlet.

Overall, mean scores for the group of respondents as a whole suggest that all factors, except for organized crime, are between “somewhat” and “significantly” influential on the editorial policy of the media outlets where these journalists come from.

Roughly two-third of respondents believe that public institutions, political parties (including opposition political parties), big advertisers and competitors are at least “somewhat” influential on their media’s policy, while about half believe these factors are “significantly” or “very” influential (Figure 10).

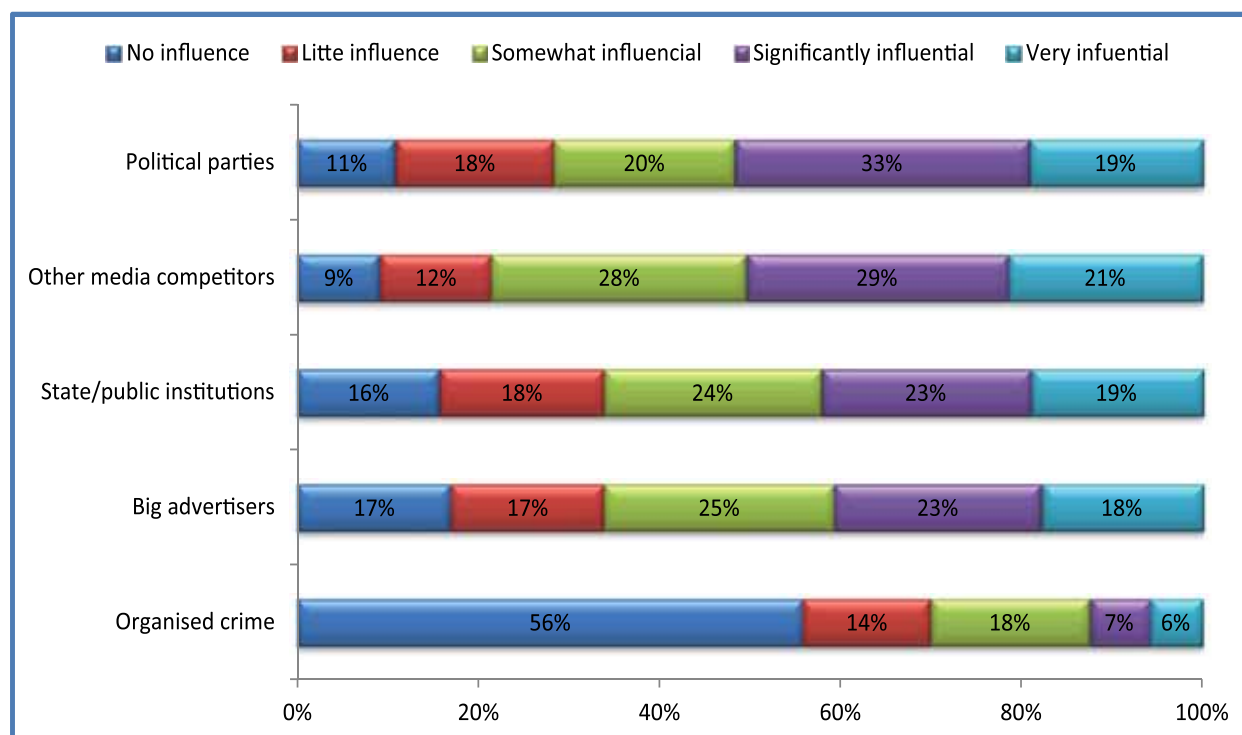


Figure 10: How much do the following actors influence the editorial policy of the media you work for?

Although through the survey the influence of **big advertisers** in shaping editorial policy is considered smaller than that of political parties and other media competitors, in the interviews with key informants more specific cases of pressure from advertisers are reported compared to the pressure from audience or readers coming from competitors. Big advertisers are identified as a large source of news avoidance as well as a pressure point to publish PR material instead of news by media outlets.

Actor	Mean
Other media competitors	3.4
Political parties	3.3
State/public institutions	3.1
Big advertisers	3.1
Organized crime	1.9

Big advertisers have an influence on the editorial policy of the television station. We don't report news that goes against their interests and in many cases produce news that do not accurately represent the quality of their products. - Editor-in-chief, Tirana

Some local media, which do not necessarily have access to big advertisers, are not reported to have significant impact from them on their editorial policy, focusing more on the need for a wider audience.

The editorial policy changes in respect to situations, and the biggest changes come when politics mingles with big events like elections, or other cases with reforms that affect directly the public. Considering that we are a business, our editorial policy is oriented toward the audience's needs, so we focus more on reporting things that have to do with the people and their daily life. - Journalist, Vlora.

In the interviews with key informants, the influence of **political parties** and **state institutions** on editorial policy is assessed on a similar level to that of big advertisers. These findings reinforce previous suggestions that the media derive a good part of their revenues from the owners' other economic interests and non-media businesses, which are supported by their political affiliation and state institutions in certain cases. State advertising is also highlighted as playing a role in shaping editorial policy.

If the owner is politicized, the role of the media outlet is to advertise and protect his/her political interests. The main actors are the media owners and those who have interests linked to media owners. If the media owner has a political position, then the media has this political position. If the owner wants the boycott of a political rival by the media outlet, it will be boycotted. - Editor, Elbasan.

Favors can be done in exchange for advertising. If an institution gives an advert to the media we work for, we reward him by not publishing a scandal related to that institution. - Journalist, Tirana.

Around 30% of respondents believe **organized crime** has at least "somewhat" influence in shaping the editorial policies of media outlets. While these figures are lower than the rest of the above-mentioned actors, it should be highlighted that, given the nature of such organizations, such perceptions are known to successfully stifle freedom of the press. In the interviews respondents highlighted that the pressure exerted by organized crime does not aim to influence editorial policy but rather targets individual journalists, which is randomly reported in local media outlets outside Tirana.

There are cases where crime had a direct impact on whether a certain news piece was reported or not, while there are also cases where threats have been made individually from people with a criminal background toward journalists for broadcasting a news story. - Editor, Shkodra

Apart from political reasons and the editorial policy of the media outlet, I have noticed the first phases of news avoidance in the media because of organized crime, which is currently trying to infiltrate politics. - Media director, Tirana.

Overall, assessments of the impact of external actors on editorial policy are lower than those on the impact of the "factors" from the preceding questions, suggesting once more that the **political and financial interests of media owners** are the main driving force in shaping the editorial policy of each media outlet, which is translated into censorship or self-censorship.

I don't think politics plays a primary role because media owners are not tied to politics but rather tied to the businesses that they run. I am lucky to be working in a media that is set apart from politics. We have some influence from certain institutions; however the editorial policy is

not influenced by the state. But for a business interest of the owner we do favors; we turn a deaf ear, or a blind eye. – Journalist, Tirana.

4.2.4. The presentation of editorial policy

During the face-to-face interviews, key informants were also asked to detail the editorial policy of the media that they worked for and the way this editorial policy was presented to them in the absence of a written document.

All of the respondents that were interviewed as part of this study report having “learnt” about the editorial policy of the media they work for during the first few months of employment, through hints, such as “It’s not the right time for this” or after a news piece was not published or broadcast.

Slowly, slowly, the journalist learns the editorial policy, albeit unwritten and unread, but knows it. I try to tell them from the beginning that we are close to the opposition, although we have news from both sides. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

From personal experience, the journalist is presented with the editorial policy of the media where he works during the actual work, learning from the news that are not published or are altered and the instructions of the owner and editor. – Journalist, Vlora.

In some cases, interviewees speak of having known the editorial policy of a certain media before working there, which is believed to induce many journalist and editors toward self-censorship, when they start working at that specific media outlet.

For certain media there are cases when journalists know the editorial policy without working there. This happens when the owner of the television station is involved in politics and the journalist knows how to package the political news, without offending the political camp of the owner. – Journalist, Vlora.

However, in the majority of cases, from the interviewed journalists and editors, it is reported that editors-in-chief and media directors are the key enforcers of this tacit policy, after being entrusted by owners with transmitting them to journalists and making sure that they abide by them, unless interests change.

It’s the editor-in-chief who explains the editorial policy to us. During meetings we are told that we keep a balance among parties, but lean toward the right. However, it is understood after a few months of work, as in many cases the editor-in-chief directly intervenes, removing a news piece of the political party that we normally don’t cover. – Journalist, Shkodra.

It’s the editor who enforces the editorial line of the TV station selected by the board or the director. In the daily editorial meeting, the journalists are issued with directives to cover those events that would not breach this policy. The editor-in-chief is notified of the editorial policy by the director but this is never done in writing. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

The interviewed editors, admitting their role as filters of the interests of the owners and the coverage of news from journalists, identify two main ways in which editorial policy is transmitted. The first is through their intervention in the substance of the news that is reported, the nuances they give to the news or the space or time they award to a specific new story.

The journalist is never told of the editorial policy of the television station directly. He needs intuition to indirectly understand the editorial policy of the TV stations. The journalist is never told, 'Don't cover this event.' However, when he/she returns to the newsroom and reports, he/she is instructed on how to draft the news piece. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

The second and most reported way in which editorial policy is transmitted to journalists is through their assignment in activities, the press conferences of political parties, minimizing the ability of the journalist to select the news story that he/she will cover as well critical and investigative news coverage.

I don't think that there is a director in the media who tells the journalist, even the editor-in-chief, that we have this certain editorial policy. That is almost always understood. The assignment of journalists to different activities and the orientation of where to focus in a way give away the editorial policy. – Editor, Tirana.

Unfortunately, we don't ask journalists what the story is but rather assign them this or that event. The ability to select what news to cover comes second in this case. – Editor, Tirana.

Although editors are widely described by the respondents as censors who safeguard the interests of the owners and conform to external pressures, the above-mentioned statements also identify the high level of self-censorship that the editorial position entails.

Although there might be conflicting points of view as to what amounts to editorial policy, the directives of the owners and directors of the media dispensed through editors are generally followed without questions by journalists. In many cases, journalists fail to question the instructions they receive because they feel that they are insecure in their job positions.

This policy is never made known in writing but through conversation with the bosses, the director and the owner. It is discussed in editorial meetings, when many times they would say that 'This person is untouchable' or 'Forget about this issue'. I have communicated such a policy superficially to my journalists. In some cases I have told them that the owner does not want a certain story followed and with that the debate is over. There has been no debate as long as I knew that the journalist needed the salary to eat before the ethics of journalism. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

The editorial policy in the Albanian media is applied marvelously. Being a media under control, the principle is that the order is obeyed and not discussed. Journalists tend to be loyal to the editorial policy and late payment of salaries by three to four months increases such loyalty. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

4.2.5. The role of editorial policy on the media coverage

In the survey for this study the respondents were also asked to assess the importance of editorial policy over decisions of what is covered and how it is covered. The question sought to assess whether respondents perceive that editorial policy is behind, or leads to the non-coverage of certain news, partisan/partial coverage of news, positive coverage/PR for political or financial partners and lack of critical and investigative journalism. An assessment was given on a 5-point scale from no influence (1), to very influential (5) and the mean scores are presented in the table below.

The results suggest that the majority believes that editorial policy is at least somewhat behind the failure to cover certain pieces of news, partisan/partial coverage of news, positive coverage/PR for political or financial partner, and lack of critical/investigative journalism. The assessment is also very similar across these phenomena, suggesting that these forms of coverage or news avoidance are possibly also largely co-present and hard to distinguish.

Impact	Mean
Lack of critical/investigative journalism	3.5
Positive coverage/PR for political or fin. Partner	3.1
Non-coverage of certain news	3.0
Partisan/partial coverage of news	2.8

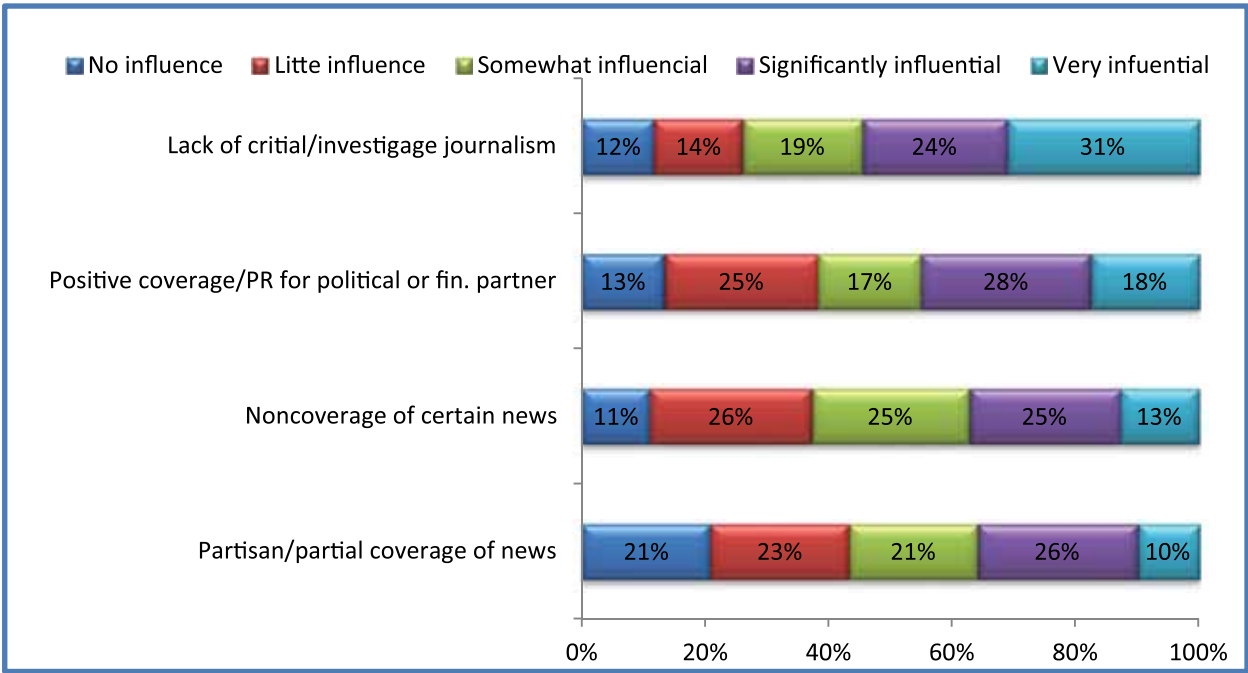


Figure 11: How much does an editorial policy influence decisions related to:

The role of editorial policy on the way news is covered comes out also through the in-depth interviews with key informants, which provide examples for all the above-mentioned cases, including non-coverage of certain news, one-sided coverage of events, positive coverage or PR and the lack of critical and investigative journalism. Underneath we list a number of statements based on the interviews with key informants that fall under the four categories of actions inside newsrooms, which are influenced by editorial policy.

Non-coverage of news and events:

We would not cover on TV news that are connected with businesses close to the owner, for example during the campaign against gambling parlors, cases where action was taken against the casinos of people connected with the owner. – Editor-in-chief

The television I have worked for, for three or four years, is now under the influence of the former political majority currently in opposition. We are closer to them than the

government. The news in support of opposition are always more important than any other news that normally would be considered timely. As editor-in-chief and journalist, I need to be close to the opposition and they in turn have developed a trust relationship. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

The lack of finances that the owners face to keep up a TV station and their friendships, mainly with the heads of political parties, are the main factors that lead to a lack of, or one-sided, coverage of news. It happens many times that some important events, especially where political chiefs are involved in corruption scandals, are completely sidestepped. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

One-sided coverage of news and events:

When the media support a certain political group the journalist follows every event of this group. The good angle is highlighted, milestones and the message is transmitted. In the events of opposing political groups the news has only an informative value, often underling elements that have no importance for the audience, only to have some balance in the time allocated to each side. – Journalist, Elbasan

There are many cases when an event is covered depending on the editorial policy of the television station, adding positive or negative nuances, depending on the case and the people involved in the event. For example, in the case of a political activity of the government the news piece has positive nuances and more minutes of coverage allocated than a news piece about the opposition. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

Positive coverage (PR) of political group or financial partner:

Not exaggeratedly positive. However, when an institution is declared untouchable for us, we have to broadcast the news that the press office sends, mostly the daily calendar. – Journalist, Tirana

Lack of critical and investigative journalism:

I wanted to do an investigative story of sorts, on the connection between doctors, pharmacists, and pharmaceutical depots. The pharmaceutical depots offer doctors and pharmacists tourist packages based on their prescriptions. After consulting with editors, digging and writing the story and paginating it, at the last moment it was decided that it would not run following an intervention from the Ministry of Health. – Journalist, Tirana

Usually, jobs are simply assigned to a journalist and they are also oriented (by editors and directors) on how to write the story. Sometime the news is written for them and they simply read it. – Journalist, Tirana

It has often happened that the news that I selected to cover has been rejected by the heads of the television stations with the argument that is not the right time to cover this story. The same thing has happened when I tried to do a current affairs show on the theme of politicians involved in corruption and I was told again that it was not the right time. The TV show was denigrated by inviting people to the studio selected by the spokesperson of the government, where the theme was of their choosing and not in the public interest. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

4.3. Frequency and practices of self-censorship

As mentioned above, the roots and causes of self-censorship in Albania are identified by the journalists and editors who took part in the survey on a number of external factors present in the media environment, which the respondents associate with media owners' finances and links with politics, the owners' economic interests and the media's financial insufficiency. A similar overview of the external pressure factors that induce journalists toward self-censorship emerges also from the in-depth interviews with key informants, which also underline that these factors are closely associated. Opinions collected from journalists and editors through the survey and key informants through the face-to-face interviews also suggest that owners' economic interests act as a pressure point, skewing editorial policy inside a media organization.

Although the editorial policy is not written, it is conveyed to journalist by hints or direct orders of editors and directors. With time, journalists, taking cues from editor's orders, hints and instructions, internalize the editorial orientation of the media outlet, avoiding critical coverage of politicians, institution or political organization that are deemed untouchable. These lead to a lack of coverage of some institutions, one-sides coverage of others, positive coverage in the form of PR and lack of critical and investigative journalism.

In this last section of findings, the report summarizes the perceptions of media professionals on: the frequency of self-censorship; the typology of news/stories most often avoided; chain of decision-making on news avoidance; as well as personal examples of cases of self-censorship among Albanian journalists.

4.3.1. Frequency of self-censorship among media professionals

In order to identify the frequency of self-censorship in the media, the respondents to the survey were also asked to evaluate the preponderance of such phenomena in the media in general, what genre of news are mainly avoided and how often they avoid the news themselves specifically.

Self-censorship is perceived to be frequent in the Albanian media. When asked whether journalists avoid news, an overwhelming 73% of respondents believe that Albanian journalists avoid stories, while only 12% believes this is never the case.

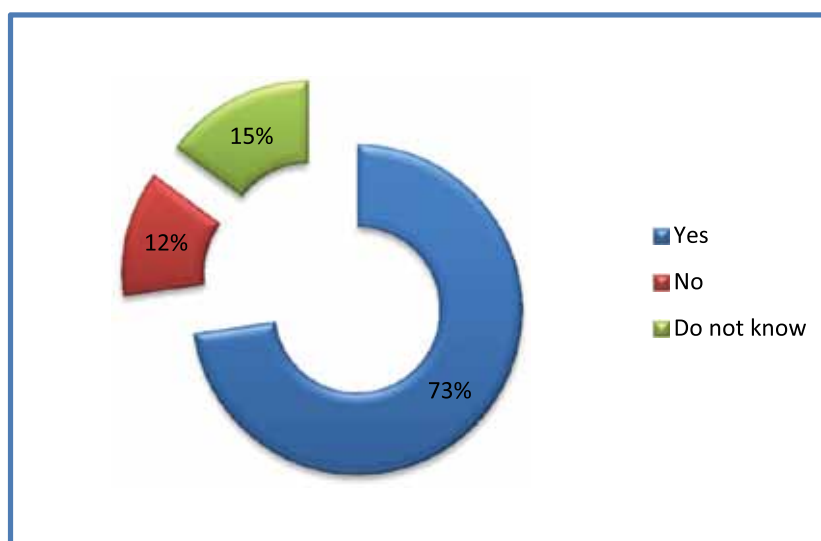


Figure 12: Do journalists knowingly avoid covering stories/news?

Findings from the interviews support the survey results. Overwhelmingly, respondents claim that avoiding news happens frequently.

Respondents in the survey were also asked about their personal experiences by assessing the frequency of their own avoidance of news/stories. Only 14% of the respondents answered that they never have avoided a story, while almost half of them (48%) report that they have avoided a story sometimes or often.

These figures about personal experience of self-censorship are lower than those of Figure 12 above, on news avoidance in general. Responses to this answer confirm trends in self-censorship research internationally, where respondents are more likely to report higher levels of self-censorship in the market, rather than in their media outlet or in their own work.

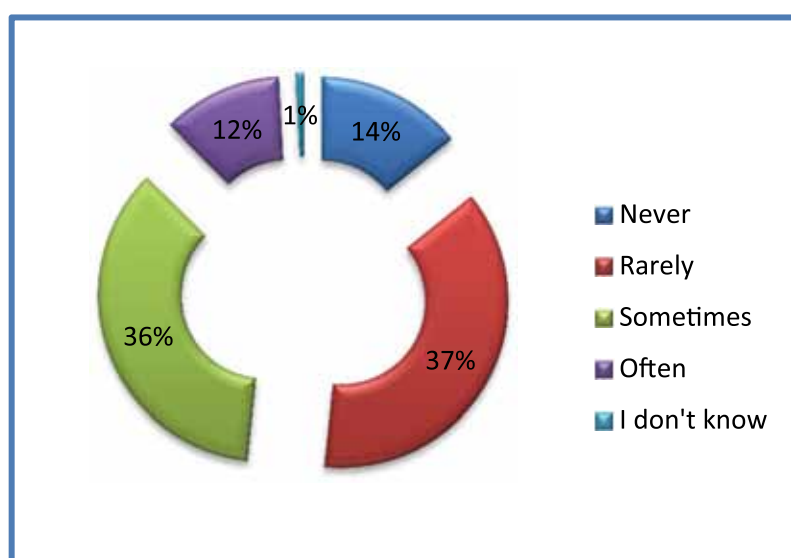


Figure 13: How often have you avoided news in your practice?

An even more downbeat picture is provided by the in-depth interviews, where an overwhelming majority of interviewees attest to daily experiences of self-censorship. In the in-depth interviews with key informants news avoidance is associated with a number of factors, such as the editorial policy of the media outlet, lack of physical security for the journalists and lack of financial support from the media outlet where the journalist work.

There are number of factors associated with the selection of a news story to be covered. First is the editorial policy of the media, second the danger that the news story poses and the third the financial factors. When it comes to investigative stories or stories related to organized crime, human trafficking, prostitution, property disputes... the news in Albania is highly dangerous, because the journalist is not protected by the police or the justice system, or from the owners of the media. – Journalist, Elbasan

The journalist selects the news story that first does not threaten his/her security, the interests of the media where he works and, after these, come the other factors. The journalist has to consider whether the media where the journalist works will run the story. Many times distance is a reason why a journalist does not cover a story, as the media where he/she works does not have the equipment to cover it. – Journalist, Elbasan

More specific reasons why journalists avoid covering a story and concrete examples when they decide to avoid coverage and induced themselves into self-censorship will be further detailed in the following subsections of this report.

4.3.2. News/stories mostly avoided

When asked about the genre of news that was mostly avoided due to self-censorship, respondents assessed avoidance to be most frequent in news related to politics and crime/ events, followed by economic news and then news on social affairs. Cultural and gossip news are perceived to be rarely avoided by the journalists. The results suggest that it is news not related to national-level public events, but rather issue-based topics that are avoided.

Asked to determine the frequency of avoidance of different sections/types of news, respondents assessed avoidance to be most frequent in news related to politics and crime/ events, with respectively about 70% and 60% who believe that it happens at least ‘sometimes’. A slightly lower number of respondents, about half, believe there is news avoidance in economic sections at least sometimes, while 20% believe it happens often and always. Social affairs follow, while 86% of respondents seem to think that news are rarely or never avoided in cultural or gossip news.

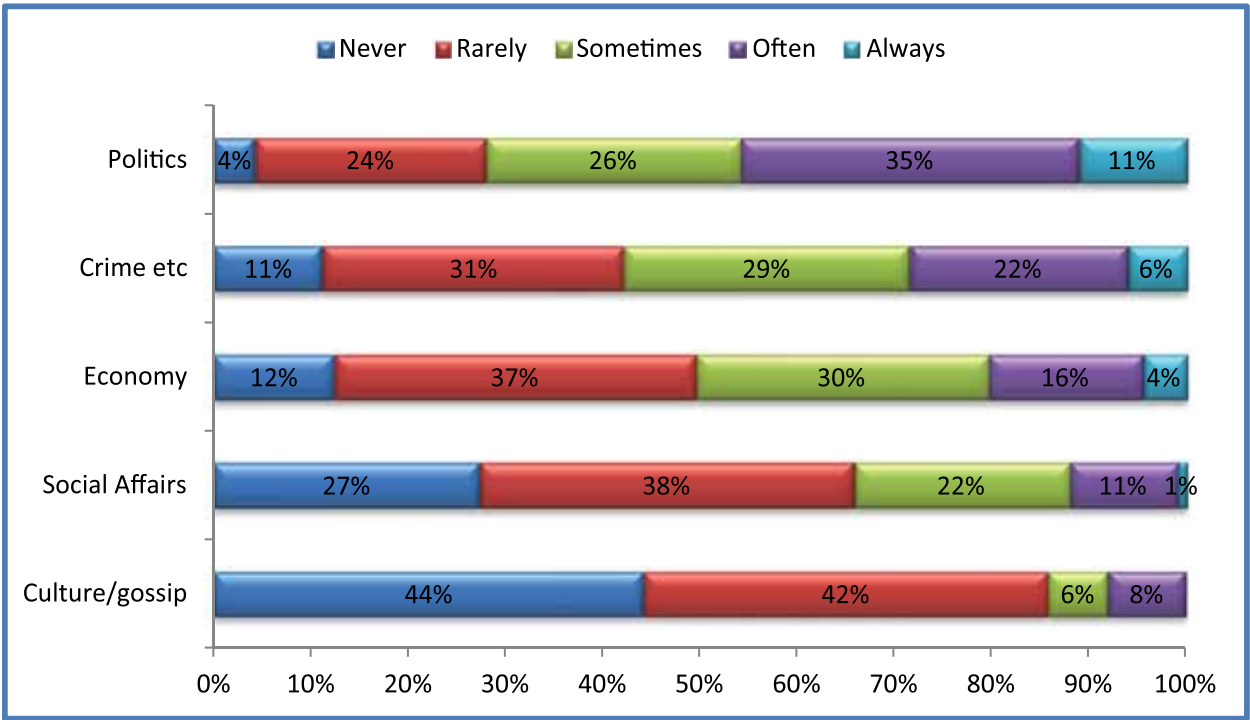


Figure 14: Types of news/stories most frequently avoided

The results of the survey of the genre of news that is mostly avoided due to self-censorship are also backed by the opinions collected through the in-depth interviews, which suggest that the owners’ political interests force reporters to avoid political news, while fears concerning personal security play a key role in avoiding crime beat stories, which otherwise are newsworthy.

4.3.3. Chain of decision-making on news avoidance

Because different factors and actors induce journalists toward self-censorship in a given media environment it is important to explore the process by which the coverage of a news story is avoided. Asked about the “chain of decision-making” on news avoidance, more than half of the respondents in the survey stated that the decision was taken by the journalists after direct or indirect hints or orders from the editors or owners, while roughly one third (28%) of respondents claim that decisions to avoid stories was made by journalists or due to perceived/anticipated lack of support by editors and owners. 16% of respondents chose “other”. Asked to explain, they predominantly state that all of the above channels are at work. Few state that the decision is taken in consultation with editors or owners.

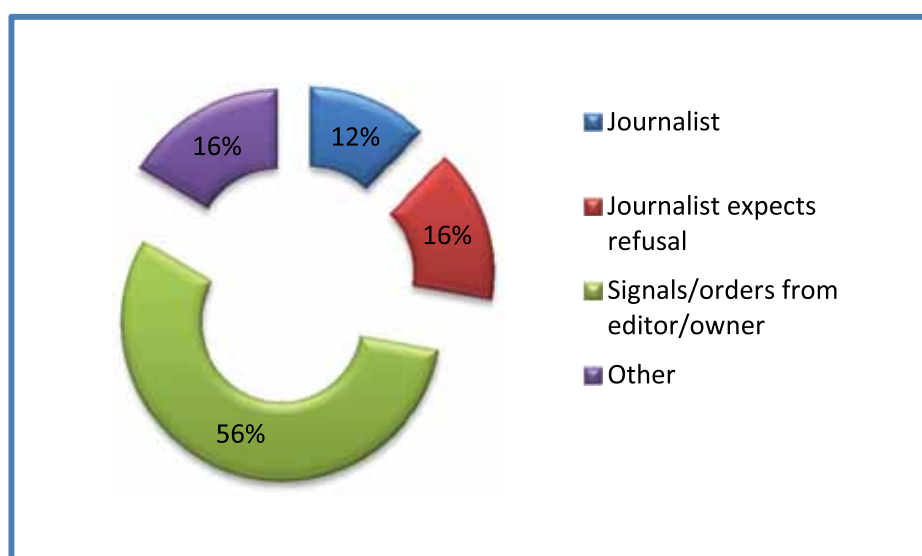


Figure 15: Decision to avoid news is taken by/via

Such results are also confirmed by the key informants through the in-depth interviews, although through the examples that were given, the segment where the decision was taken is not always easily identifiable. In many cases, key informants report that journalist take the decision to avoid a news story based on the previous instructions issued by owners and editors. The reason that pushes the reporter toward self-censorship in these cases is the avoidance of a conflict with the political and financial interests of the media owner.

Many stories do not get published because there are agreements between the heads of institutions and our bosses. We have been warned not to tread on certain institutions and we don't even try to deal with such a story. –Journalist, Tirana.

It has been made clear to us that this and that institution should not be touched. Understandably, this has made us step back. We avoid this sort of news from the first moment we hear about it. – Journalist, Tirana.

In many other cases, it appears that the decision to avoid coverage of a particular news story is taken by the journalist after he/she internalizes the editorial policy of the media he/she works for or in expectation that news piece will not be published.

Normally it happens through the editor. He does not say directly that we are pro this or that, but we have a certain policy and with the passage of time the journalist gets acquainted with this

editorial policy. No later than today a political group had a declaration regarding the elections in our municipality...it was the journalist himself who told me that we should not cover this, because he knows very well that the owner is against it. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

This happens even in cases when the editorial staff does not tell the journalist what to cover or avoid. It's the journalist who knows well what the specific media he/she works for expects, so follows the same direction. He/she knows where to step or not. However, there are certain cases where the editor instructs directly what to do. For me both are valid. – Media expert

The journalists are not told the editorial policy followed by the media. Normally they 'smell' and perceive it due to the one-sidedness of the media owner and thus put boundaries on themselves, or find other mediums to transmit the story they have secured. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

As was underlined above, in order to uphold the editorial policy installed by the owner, it is reported that editors are the ones that mostly face self-censorship, which later translates into self-censorship for other members of the same media outlet.

In my role I had to serve as a filter for the editorial policy sought by the owner of media outlet. I had to change texts, cut footage and remove news pieces that violated the TV's editorial policy. After this, the journalists practice self-censorship. The owner instructs what should be avoided in the media outlet. He does not explicitly ask us to advertise his work, but this is understood. – Editor, Elbasan.

The examples offered from the in-depth interviews but also through the open question in the questionnaire, underline that in many cases the journalist takes the decision to avoid the news, mainly due to reasons related to physical security, the inability to cover the financial costs or personal connections with the subject of the news story.

I have personally avoided covering stories... mostly cases from the crime beat, arrests and accidents; because in some cases I have been contacted by those detained or through family connections I was asked not to publish the full name of a suspect. – Journalist, Shkodra.

I have avoided coverage of a story, when someone has died and the media outlet I work for asked me to interview the family members. I avoided going to the remote village because I lacked transportation and the media I work for would not cover the expenses and does not pay me enough. I have avoided covering stories that were murder cases where the authors were not yet arrested because I feared for my safety. – Editor, Elbasan

4.3.4. Examples of self-censorship

The data and opinions that were collected through the questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews with key informants suggest that self-censorship is widespread in the Albanian media; however, the factors that journalists directly associate with cases of self-censorship are diverse.

Asked about frequency of reasons associated to specific cases of news avoidance, respondents to the survey mostly chose factors related to the media's and media owners' interests and to physical safety and threats to careers. Most journalists believe that self-censure rarely happens due to journalists' personal interests, connections, or fears. An overwhelming majority believes that the complexity of the news for the audience is never or rarely a reason for avoiding news.

The reasons and examples provided in the in-depth interviews present a complex picture, dominated by expectations of lack of editorial support due to power and financial interest, followed by concerns over safety. Personal values and connections lead to self-censorship of some details in a story or to the transfer of a news piece to colleagues for coverage.

As shown in Figure 16 below, respondents were asked to assess the frequency of a long list of factors that journalists associate with news avoidance, with frequency assessed on a scale from “never” to “always”. The list consisted of:

- personal factors of the journalist – such as values, connections, motivation, effect on career, and personal and family/friends’ physical safety;
- factors related to resources available, editorial support, and political & economic interest of owners; and
- factors related to the nature of the news.

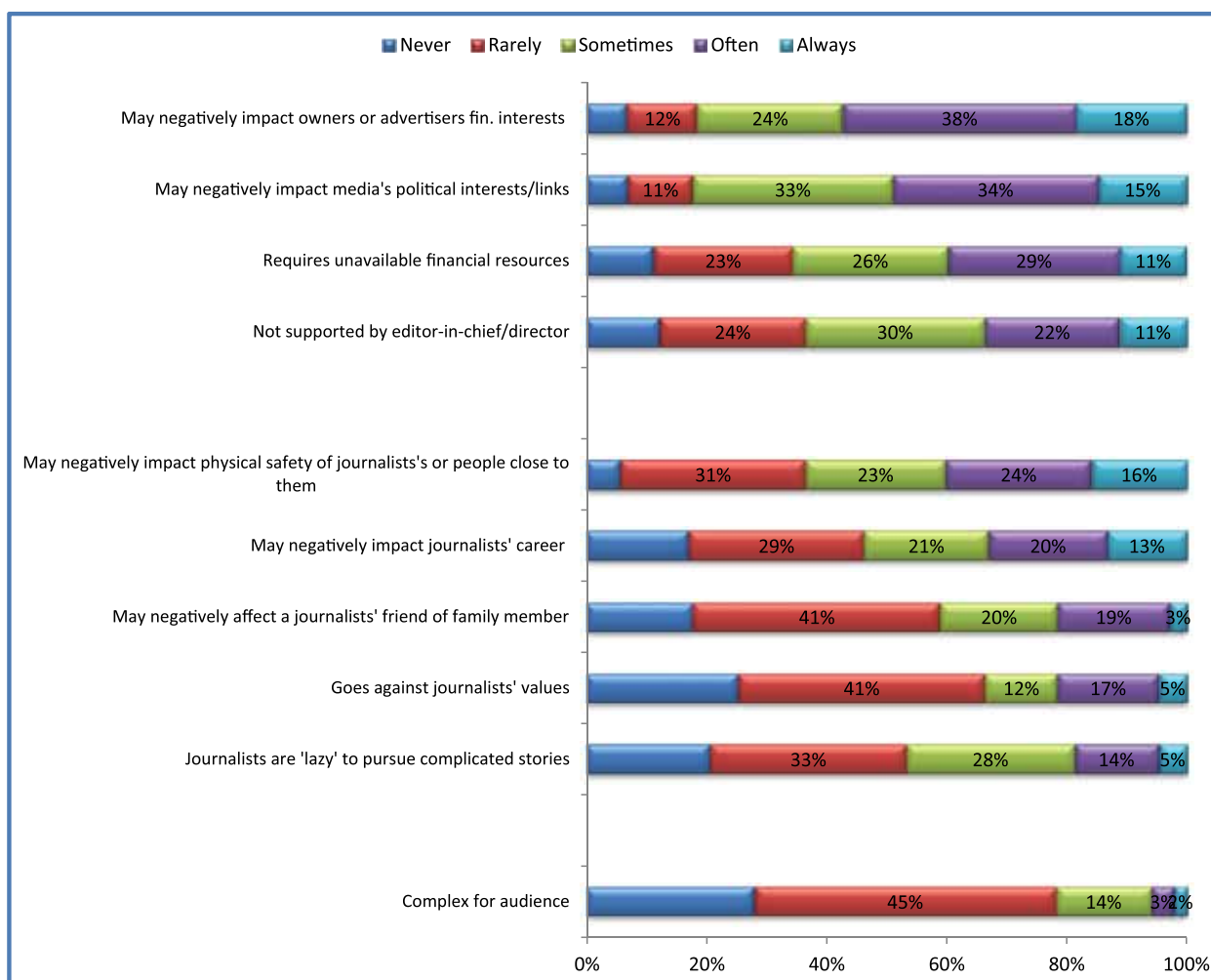


Figure 16: If yes, how often do journalists avoid news/stories because it may ...?

Factors related to the media owners’ interests are believed to most often lead to self-censorship. About two-thirds of respondents believe that economic and financial interests of the media outlet, lack of editorial staff support and lack of resources lead to self-censorship at least sometimes. About half of the respondents believe that perceived negative impact on the media’s financial and political interests, and lack of support by editors and directors

“often” or “always” leads to self-censorship.

Most journalists, about 45-65%, believe that self-censure rarely or never happens due to journalists’ personal interests, connections, or fears – and especially as regards values and connections of friendship or kinship.

A significant portion of 35-40% of them, however, believes that physical safety and threats to careers “often” or “always” lead to self-censure. The fact that 40% of respondents consider personal safety to be such an issue is not only alarming, but also raises questions over where such threats are perceived to come from or do come from.

An overwhelming 80% of respondents believe that the complexity of the news for the audience is never or rarely a reason for avoiding news.

The examples of specific cases of self-censorship gathered through the in-depth interviews, as well as the factors associated to them from the journalists are also diverse. Below are listed some of the personal examples of self-censorship listed by the participants to this study, which are categorized based on the leading factor. Still, it is important to emphasize that in most cases the examples of self-censorship shared are associated and induced by more than one factor.

The most quoted factor associated with cases of news avoidance is the knowledge that the story will not be published or transmitted because it negatively affects individuals in power or institutions that the owner supports. These are reported to be in most of the cases news about the past of a certain politician in power, corruption, court cases, the economic activities of the owner or affiliates, and news about poverty.

The self-censorship of a journalist works in cases where he knows that the news piece will not be broadcast and he does not bother covering it. This happens with the coverage of the political group that is opposed to the editorial policy of the media he works for. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

For certain institutions we only advertise their work without stepping on the interests of certain people, identified as friends of the owner. Meanwhile, there are institutions we are explicitly asked to attack. – Editor, Elbasan.

In many cases, journalists report avoiding covering news stories due to the lack of support from their editors and the slight chances that the news piece will be broadcast or published. Also another reason for avoiding news by journalists is the lack of resources, which particularly affects events in distant areas, or journalistic investigations.

In Albania, there are really good journalists, who due to editorial policies are forced to report only one-sided stories. Even when the journalist reports a really good story in the editorial meeting, often his sources are questioned and this is the way to tell him that the news piece will not be broadcast, because government officials do not confirm it. Repeated cases like this make the journalist censure himself and report only official news. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

The fact that the journalist is directly or indirectly aware that news stories such as investigations into politicians or organized crime will not be broadcast on television has made them avoid covering them. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

Many investigative stories require a lot of work and financial resources that no one will make available. The newspapers have for some time not allocated any financial resource for an exposé

and, as a result, the story does not write itself. – Journalist, Elbasan.

Journalists report that the main reason why they avoid covering news stories connected to the political/economic interests of the owner, following the instructions received from the editor, is due to lack of job security in the journalistic profession.

I have the impression that the problem depends on the actions of the media owner. You may have long experience and one day you may find yourself in violation of the editorial policy or orders given by the owner and end up in the street, since you have no contract. – Editor-in-chief, Shkodra

Journalists and editors have no control in this situation. If they tried to raise their voices and publish a story that violates the editorial policy they will be fired. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana

Personal experiences of self-censorship because of safety concerns are also reported in many interviews. In a significant number of cases, interviewees report news avoidance because of safety concerns - especially with news on crime, organized crime, trafficking, and property disputes.

The situation in the media where I work can be described as good; however, much is left to be desired in terms of journalists' job security. In cases when a murder or an accident or a political event happens, the journalist always wonders whether a story should follow - this is due to the pressure he might receive or fear of pressure, because people involved might contact me privately and ask for explanations about why I covered that. – Journalist, Shkodra

I want to underline a case from the crime beat department. When I asked the journalist how the story developed, he explicitly told me that he was afraid to follow it. It regarded a criminal gang in Tirana. When he told me they were involved we did not dig further. There are many cases when journalist set boundaries due to their security concerns and this happens mainly to crime-beat journalists. – Editor-in-chief, Tirana.

In another case we published the photo of a wanted person suspected of being part of a gang. The members of the gang were not shy to show up and show their teeth. There have been cases where I have received phone calls... this kind of things occur almost daily when you are a journalist covering certain stories. – Journalist, Vlora.

There are cases when the journalist feels insecure about following a story dictated by the editor and withdraws. The reasons behind this are fear, pressure, the security of family members and fear of revenge from the people involved. – Editor, Shkodra.

In a few cases, interviewees report news avoidance because of the personal concerns of the journalist, such as family connections or friendships with individuals affected by the news. Reasons tied to the lack of physical security in the workplace are more prevalent for journalists who work for local news outlets, or are correspondents of national news outlet outside the capital. *Living in a small town, personal connections force you not to broadcast a story that would breach the integrity or security of a family member or relative in a certain position. – Journalist, Vlora.*

It is to be noted that the majority of examples are cases where conflicts of interest are anticipated rather than communicated, suggesting a high level of self-censorship. Importantly, threats mentioned are generally communicated and not simply perceived. In few cases they are posited as "advice" from persons of influence.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to tackle the phenomenon of self-censorship in the Albanian media, during the in-depth interviews, respondents were also asked to suggest possible actions that should be undertaken in this regard. The valuable recommendations received from media actors in these interviews are presented below, grouped under 1) media ownership and financing; 2) work conditions and protection of journalists; and 3) professionalism and ethics.

Media Ownership and Financing

- *Promotion of employee/journalist-owned media outlets in Albania*

One of the alternatives suggested by the participants of this study, in order to reverse the trend towards self-censorship among local journalists, is to support employee-owned media outlets where the pressure of media owner's economic and political interest is smaller. Employee-owned media can be established by the founding of new media outlets by a group of journalists and editors with seed funding or through the transfer of shares in existing media from owners to journalists and editors as part of the benefits/remunerations that they receive.

- *Development of online media outlets as a response to the mainstream media's failure to be financially independent, which could act as a balancing factor toward the power of traditional media owners*

The participants in this study bestow great hope on new online media models, as a response to the traditional media's financial insufficiency and the influence of owner's financial interest on mainstream media outlets. They point out that some journalists have been able to escape censorship and self-censorship by publishing in alternative online outlets like blogs or social media websites. Although a viable financial model for successful online media outlets in Albania has yet to be created, the market is bustling with new start-up, which key informants believe will provide an answer to the mainstream media as they mature.

- *Increase scrutiny and transparency of media finances and finances of media owners, which would include their other non-business interest*

Another alternative suggested by the participants to this study, in order to counter self-censorship, is to increase the transparency of the media owner's economic and political interests. It is believed that such disclosure could have a direct impact, reducing the pressure on journalists and editors from the triangle created between politics, business and media. Another more radical suggestion from the participants is to restrict media ownership completely for owners who have other stated business interests. The respondents believe that media outlets should be functioning under a viable profit-making business model, rather than acting as "attack dogs" for the other business interests of the owner.

- *Increase transparency in state-sponsored advertising*

In order to increase the transparency of finances, measures should be taken to disclose the level of state-sponsored advertising from both central and local institutions as well

as state-owned companies. Some of the respondents have suggested the establishment of an independent body to measure television audiences and newspaper readership, which would assist the market-oriented distribution of state ads. In this context, respondents have suggested drafting a law on media that should include all the above mentioned suggestions in an inclusive regulatory framework.

- *Integration of local media outlets into a larger market in order to enable serious investment and financial self-reliance through sales and advertising*

In the context of reducing the media's financial insufficiency in Albania, one of the main external factors perceived to be driving reporters and editors toward self-censorship, the respondents propose taking steps to help local media outlets integrate into larger media markets as part of multinational companies. This could be done by restructuring the media scene in Albania through a media law, which should have as its goal attracting serious investment that will focus local media outlets on generating revenues through sales and advertising rather than political favors and traffic of influence.

Work conditions and protection of journalists

- *Better enforcement of the labor code by media outlets, which includes paying salaries in full and on time, as well as respect for holidays, overtime and sick leave*

Most of the respondents to the survey and the majority of key informants interviewed believe the lack of contracts and proper enforcement of the labor code to protect the rights of journalists and stop abuse by their employers are the main factors that push media professionals toward self-censorship. To counter such negative factors it is suggested that journalists' associations should be strengthened so they can advocate the better enforcement of the labor code by media outlets, as well strive to organize the signing of collective contracts with employers.

- *Establishment and strengthening of self-regulatory bodies and unions to improve the professional standing of the journalistic profession*

Many of the respondents to the survey and key informants interviewed as part of this study perceive that the standing of the journalistic profession has been downgraded in the last decade. To counter such a trend, they suggest the establishment of stronger association of journalists to protect their right but also regulatory bodies that will oversee the application of ethical and professional standards by members of the news media.

Professionalism and Ethics

- *Written ethics code and editorial policies*

Most Albanian media, those in print, online or TV, do not have written ethic codes or editorial policies. The respondents to this study believe that media outlets should formalize their editorial policies, which have to be understood as a set of professional standards, as well as their ethic codes in writing. The approval and formalization of the editorial policy and ethics code will make the work of media outlets more transparent and aid the role of self-regulating mechanism, which will be able to hold them accountable to their own standards.

- *University curricula improvement*

One of the factors identified by the participants as a negative push factor toward self-censorship is the level of professionalism in the Albanian media. The respondents to this study partly blame the lack of professionalism among local journalist on the lack quality of the curricula for journalism students in universities, which they underline should be improved and updated to reflect the latest professional standards and developments in the media scene, both locally and internationally.

- *Life-long training for journalists*

To increase the level of professionalism among journalists, respondents to the study suggest that media professionals need life-long training activities, particularly in local media outlets outside the capital, where there are few workshops and conferences. They suggest that support for training conducted by media development organizations should continue and increase its reach, with more journalists trained. Such training should come not only through formal workshops but mostly through on-the-job training activities that increase both knowledge and capacities of journalists.

- *Support for investigative journalism and coverage of underreported areas and groups*

Despite the level of professionalism, respondents felt that some forms of coverage, like investigative journalism, coverage of remote and underreported areas or of vulnerable groups, will be difficult to fund under the commercial media scheme in a small market like Albania's, which leads many journalist and editors towards news avoidance. They suggest that non-profit media models that focus on investigative journalism and vulnerable groups should be supported in order to provide coverage of important topics that otherwise would not be reported on due to financial insufficiency or pressure from external factors.

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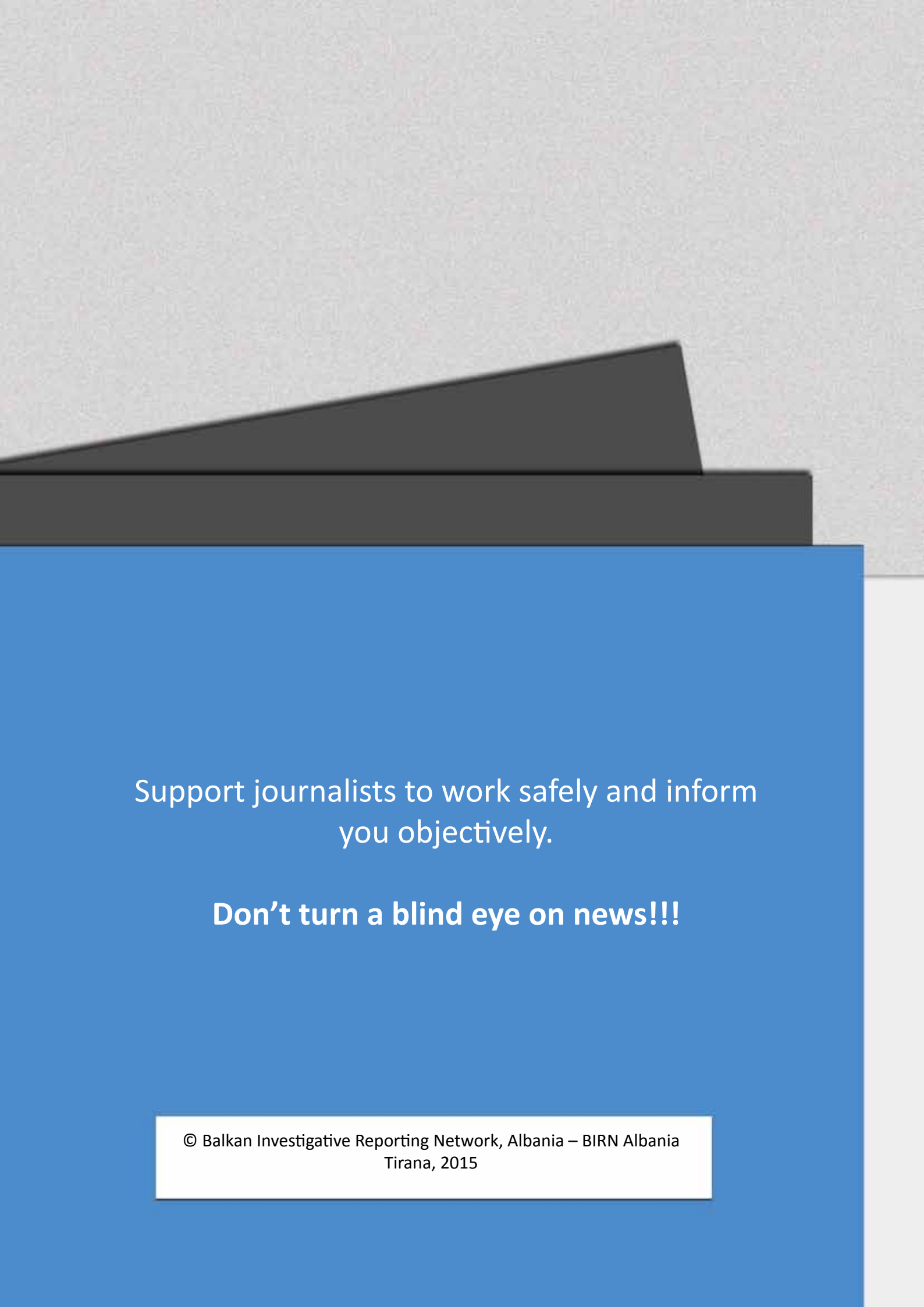
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