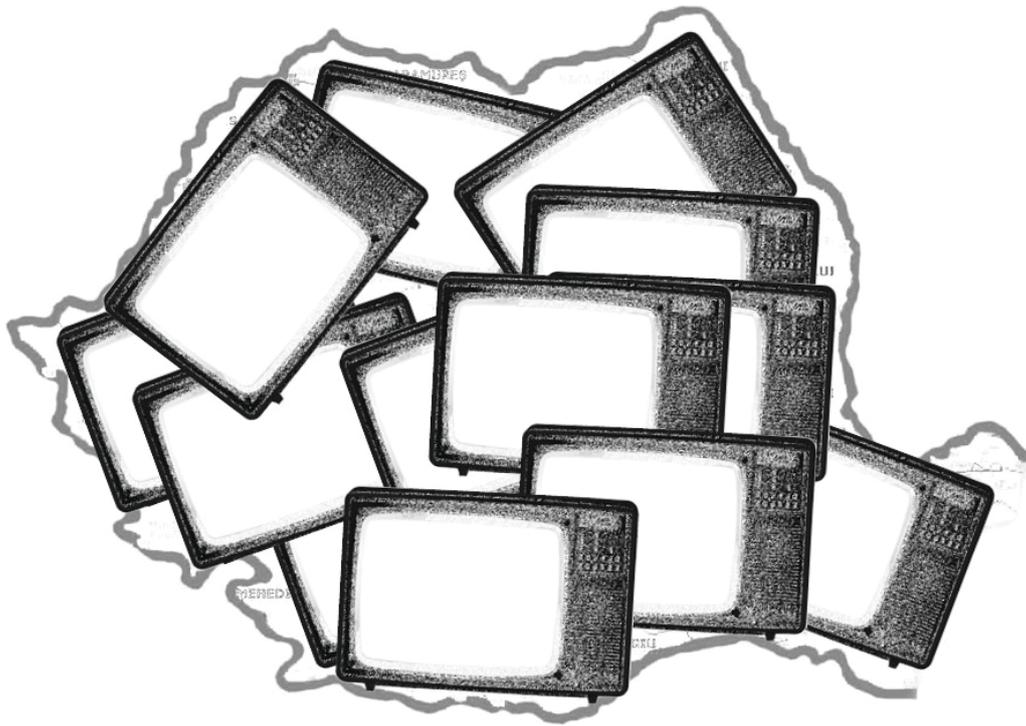




FREEEX PROGRAM

# The Political Map of Local Televisions

- overview -



- Member of Reporters without Borders -

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# CONTENT

<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>2</b>
The objective of this research was to: .....	2
<b>OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Local TV stations represent political weapons and, more often than not, they are sponsored from public funding .....	3
2. ISSUES.....	5
2.1. Criteria of subject selection .....	5
2.2. Means of information collection .....	5
2.3. Media content disseminated by local TV stations .....	7
2.4. Editorial hierarchy and the organization of media businesses .....	9
2.5. Human resources .....	10
2.6. Local TV station owner or manager.....	12
2.7. Business model .....	13
2.8. The politicians' mentality towards local TV stations.....	15
2.9. Tomorrow's journalists .....	17
2.10. The audience is irrelevant.....	18
2.11. Protection and responsibility.....	19
3. CONCLUSIONS .....	20
4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS .....	20

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research was to:

Create an X-ray of the current situation of local TV stations regarding their financial status, the political and economic pressures they are subject to, the professionalization and self-regulation levels. Furthermore, the research set out to identify the best solutions to improve the economic dynamics and to ensure the independence of local media.

The following methods were used for data collection:

- desk research - analysis of official documents (statistics, data from the National Trade Register Office, data from the National Audiovisual Council - NCA, etc.)
- in-depth interviews with relevant agents (managers of media institutions, owners of local TV stations, journalists, local media analysts, politicians, local officials, local NGO activists with relevant expertise, etc.)

We disclosed the identity only of those who agreed to it.

- Number of researched local TV stations: 56.
- Number of discussions and interviews conducted: approx. 200 (with a medium duration per interview of 1.5 hours).
- Hundreds of hours of desk research.

Counties researched: Arad, Bacău, Braşov, Caraş-Severin, Cluj, Constanţa, Dolj, Galaţi, Giurgiu, Iaşi, Mureş, Prahova, Timiş, Vâlcea, Vrancea.

The county reports are available only in Romanian. They contain data on the most relevant local TV stations, including ownership data, political and business connections, sources of funding (including public funding sources) and other financial data (such as annual turnover, profit and loss). They also include information about the attitudes, opinions and values of the interviewees in regard to: economic problems, professional issues, political and economic pressures, management - journalist relationship, journalist unions, media law, ethics and self-regulation, solutions for improving the quality and the independence of local media.

## OVERVIEW

### **1. Local TV stations represent political weapons and, more often than not, they are sponsored from public funding**

ActiveWatch has published a study on the political influence on local Romanian TV stations. The study is the result of collaboration between journalists and activists, with a sociologist's assistance. For an entire year, we conducted interviews in the news rooms of the most important local TV stations in 15 counties. ActiveWatch processed almost 200 interviews and discussions taken in about 300 hours of discussions with journalists, managers and media owners, local politicians and NCA representatives. Add to that hundreds of hours of *desk research* for collecting other relevant data about the local TV stations included in the research.

Our initial intention was to present a map of political colours for each local TV station. We expected to identify various degrees of political involvement and even neutral TV stations. However, we ended up re-thinking that initial plan. Political or economic entanglements in the management or the ownership of local TV stations are very often so complex that it becomes difficult to clearly define the political colour of a TV station. In addition, in many cases, data is missing. Nevertheless, there is an alarmingly high number of cases in which local TV stations constitute a political and economic weapon sponsored, directly or indirectly, from public funding. Thus, almost half of the 56 TV stations included in the research are influenced by politicians, directly or indirectly. Moreover, almost half of these TV stations are the direct beneficiaries of sponsorship from public funding, but the number is probably much higher.

That is why, many times, the political support TV stations receive is subject to change, depending on the parties that end up controlling the budget of the local administration or on the ever changing political inclinations of the TV station owner.

The study synthesizes the means used by local TV stations to service politicians and provides an in-depth mapping of the media in each county.

This is an unprecedented study as it generates a detailed depiction of local TV stations, of the employees engaged in such an enterprise, of the manner in which a media business is conducted and of the media owners or managers' frame of mind. And, obviously, it also approaches the level of political involvement in the media business.

Why is the information in this study important? Because, according to the Standard Eurobarometer 78, "Public Opinion in the European Union", published in February 2013, TV is the main source of information for 97% of Romanians.

The X-ray is shocking. According to the type of content disseminated by local TV stations, Romanians are unaware of living in an informational desert. Theoretically, the local press underlies an information ecosystem since the most important information broadcast is taken over by the national press that does not invest in any other means of information collection. In its turn, the national press informs political decision-makers, intermediates pressure on local politicians or represents the source for the international press. Thus, a local non-existing press or one that neglects its basic function of informing and providing a voice for the citizens corrupts the foundation of the information ecosystem.

As serious as the situation of the local TV stations might be as big the opportunity for honest, initiative-driven journalists who have the patience to identify the community's needs regarding information. It is a field without any competition whatsoever. The local community can be a partner in content production. And the national and international media's need for content can become a source of income for groups of independent journalists. Nevertheless, a careful and consistent construction is required, one that aims at creating a credible and upright brand, evincing clear-cut journalistic values around people, not companies.

The interviews revealed a lack of concern for studying, testing and adapting various business models that might escape the corruptive catch-22 of political subsidies or the dependence on advertising.

The problems of local TV stations are almost identical from one county to the other. All the crucial stages of the journalistic process are often vitiated: from choosing a subject to its publication, from the management style to the organization of the news room, from the financial source to the monetization of media operations.

Furthermore, local TV stations are set up not just by politicians, but also by institutions such as city halls or county councils in some cases. There are media businesses that actually have work spaces in such institutions.

The reports for each county can be read in the following chapters. These reports and the interviews prove two essential aspects of the enterprise called local TV network.

**The antagonism between theory and practice.** Whether it is politicians, media managers or employees, many times they divine the correct answer to more delicate questions, but, in practice, they contradict themselves. This is one of the many examples detailed in the report: Cornelia Dunăreanu, from Banat TV in Reșița, is media owner and editor-in-chief, therefore both an administrator and an editorial coordinator. And yet she says: *"The administrative and the editorial aspects do not overlap"* (Cornelia Dunăreanu ran for an MP seat on the ARD<sup>1</sup> lists at the 2012 elections).

Secondly, it shows **the magnitude of the sponsorship phenomenon**, with funding generated directly from the local administration or, indirectly, from the management's business with state-owned institutions. Local TV stations are watching the wallet of the power, but in many cases not as a *watchdog*. *"Local TV stations are more like PR factors for politicians when the latter are in power."* (Marcel Tolcea, University Professor, Department Chair - Journalism, Timișoara).

Furthermore, the interviews demonstrate that many newsroom employees do not display any journalistic priorities in their collection of information, processing and dissemination work and they do not abide by deontological norms. Their work can be more realistically defined as registration and amplification of messages others have conceived. Consequently, we decided to use the term **media employee** instead of journalist.

We elaborated below a synthetic presentation of the recurrent issues from county to county to which we added our own analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Right Romania Alliance

## 2. ISSUES

### 2.1. Criteria of subject selection

When it comes to choosing a subject, many local newsrooms apply non-journalistic criteria.

*"In the local mass-media, the contact between journalist / manager / media owner and politician is direct, sometimes highly personal, which generates pressure on the mass-media, attempts at interference in editorial policies, at imposition of a certain approach to sensitive issues, at exercising a ban on issues or people that can or cannot be present in the politics-controlled media."* (Andrei Ando, West TV General Manager, Arad)

*"We have blocked materials from being broadcast for economic reasons. If the news is about a company that has a campaign about some sales, I tell the reporter not to broadcast the news, since that firm had refused to sign an advertising contract with us."* (TV Manager, Galați)

An important criterion is that the subject chosen does not cause any discomfort to the media owner's business partners or the political supporters: *"If a reporter has information about a candidate with a very well paid campaign broadcast by that TV station, he is required to ask for the board's permission as that might cause a conflict."* (Gheorghe Ilaș, Journalist, Timiș).

Often, when there are doubts regarding the owners' interests, the documentation starts off by requesting the board's permission: *"We know what infringing principles means and seldom do we address the board regarding the broadcast of certain materials. (...) First we ask and then we get to work, so as not to put in the work and then find out it is too late because we did not abide by certain principles."* (TVS Brașov Producer).

When choosing a subject, one also takes into account the fact that the media employees live in a rather small community: *"I know when to limit my freedom. I too live in this town, but I do not want it breathing down my neck."* (Etalon TV Freelance Journalist & Collaborator, Vâlcea).

### 2.2. Means of information collection

The local press lives off press conferences, official statements and lays itself open to the abuse of public servants.

*"Journalists have to stop being perceived as beggars at the doors of ministries or town halls."* (Ana Maria Gâlcă, Editor-in-Chief, Oltenia 3 TV Anchorwoman & TV Host, Dolj).

The symbiosis among politics, business and press, engaged in a feudal power system, annihilates the media employees' ability to collect information.

According to many respondents, one of the main sources of information for the local media employees is the public administration. *"We go to absolutely all the press conferences held by the political parties unless we are not invited."* (Știi TV Producer, Mureș).

The outcome is the lack of competition regarding information diversity and context: *"There is no fight for information in the local press. We are actually friends and we help one another."* (Simona Mara, Banat TV Journalist, Caras-Severin); *"I have seen that Muntenia and Valahia TV stations have a very good relationship. If one TV station does not have any journalists present at an event and the other one does, they exchange recordings and photos."* (PNL<sup>2</sup> Representative, Giurgiu).

<sup>2</sup> National Liberal Party

Many times, the essential work tools for a typical local newsroom - which has around 10 employees - are press statements and conferences. *"We do not have the resources to do field work or the money for gas. We attend all the press conferences (...)." (Valahia TV Manager, Giurgiu).*

The editors-in-chief say they do not pay much attention to politics, but, at the same time, they seem to perceive the local administration differently from politics: *"Political events are at the bottom of the list in our news broadcasts and journalists are rarely sent to the parties' press conferences. (...) We go to press conferences in the administrative, health and sports fields." (Gelu Gheorghe Chetraruc, TVT 89 General Producer, Timiș).*

The focus on press conferences and official statements hogs editorial resources: *"There should be more financial independence and a rejection of press conferences. Field work is being neglected and the journalist has set camp within the municipality." (Valahia TV Journalist, Giurgiu).*

Consequently, the preferred means of collecting data is often limited to the information the local authorities communicate and to official requests for information: *"The problem is the lack of documentation, the tendency to resume one's documentation to press statements and the raw data someone offers." (TV Vâlcea 1 Producer).*

Public servants abuse their power position. *"Firstly, we come against the spokespersons from institutions. They are silent. They do not speak." (Valahia TV Reporter, Giurgiu).*

Frequently, requests receive responses only if the TV station addressing them is close to the political "gang" that is currently in power: *"We come against the lack of transparency in major public institutions. We are not provided with information even when we make a written request based on Law 544 [regarding the access to information for the public interest - editor's note]." (Focus TV Journalist, Vrancea).*

Another condition to receive answers from officials is not to criticize the system: *"Nobody wants to attack the corruption in the justice system because everybody needs sources, not enemies, in the justice." (Cristian Franț, Vest TV Reporter & Producer, Caraș-Severin).*

There are cases when the law is actually used against the people requesting information: *"We would request information based on Law 544 [regarding the access to information for the public interest - editor's note] and the answer would be published by the competition before it would even get to us." ("Ziarul de Vrancea" Journalist).*

So, the media employees that are paid to produce a certain quantity of content make compromises in the documentation process. Broadcasting politicians' full speeches is frequently mentioned: *"There are political figures that have become accustomed to dictating articles and the politician's exact words to journalists." (Nadia Iucu, Tele Europa Nova Journalist, Timiș).*

When faced with abuses from public servants, the reaction is almost non-existent. There have been very few legal actions or court cases followed through for violating Law 544/ 2001 regarding the access to information for the public interest. The means to avoid such abuses have rarely been described. Many media employees do not know how to document subjects so that they do not depend on official statements, but only generate such answers.

The newsrooms do not use techniques of source construction dedicated to a certain subject or the construction and usage of databases and digital tools. Thus, independent documentation attempts are easily nipped in the bud: *"Many co-workers have given up certain subjects because they could not*

obtain information. Why? Because the guards would not let them in.” (Nadia Iucu, *Tele Europa Nova Journalist*, Timiș).

Journalists, but also editors-in-chief, complain that people prove reluctant to talk to the press: *”We come against people’s lack of openness. Many times there is information people refuse to affirm in front of cameras and, then, it is more difficult to quote the sources. Many of them are afraid.”* (Transilvania Live Editor-in-Chief, Cluj); *”I have seen that in Arad the current trend is to be led up the garden path. The interviewee accepts to talk to the journalist, but when the former gets there, he tells you he does not have the time, that he will give you someone else, that he did not know it was going to be broadcast on TV, that you better write what he says.”* (TV Arad Journalist).

The lack of trust in the press could stem from the lack of deontology exhibited by media institutions in the relationship with the sources. Between a source and an advertising client, journalists often end up working for the latter: *”We tell the advertising clients that people are coming to us to complain, but we do not broadcast the material. It is not nice bite the hand that feeds you. (...) I asked if we had any advertising contract. We did not, so I broadcast the material. If we had had one, we would not have been able to do it.”* (Valea Prahovei TV Reporter); *”On the editorial agenda, people who help the station, those who have signed advertising contracts come first.”* (Etalon TV Journalist, Vâlcea).

Journalistic deontology is not always important to the media employees when it comes to practical situations: *”If I go 100 km from Craiova to write a piece for the County Council, I do not care who pays. If the Brasov Regional Development Agency invites you and there is collaboration or a contract, it is normal to go and obviously they will provide accommodation and meals.”* (Nicolae Duță, TVS Editor-in-Chief, Dolj); *”Settling the bill? Yes, that seems fair.”* (Cristian Franț, Vest TV Reporter & Producer, Caraș-Severin); *”If we are talking about having drinks and the journalist obtains information he otherwise would not have obtained, then it is OK. If we are talking about a party, it is unacceptable.”* (Freelance Journalist, Timiș).

Overall, media employees do not master any documentation techniques, they do not know how to obtain and build sources, how to avoid obstacles and gather resources and, therefore, they become easily replaceable. *”I did not actually need an editor-in-chief. Whoever headed into the field would take the camera, film, download the material in an almost raw form and the image spoke more words than anyone’s opinion. Besides, that was when we first introduced the system through which the viewers could send materials via their cell phones.”* (Constanța TV Founder).

## 2.3. Media content disseminated by local TV stations

2.3.1. Choosing subjects using non-journalistic criteria and the lack of any methods for the collection of information except for press statements or conferences generate **churnalism**.

*”Local TV stations are more like PR factors for politicians when the latter are in power.”* (Marcel Tolcea, University Professor, Department Chair - Journalism)

The difference between the theory supported by all interviewees and the practical description of TV work is striking. Though they claim to be broadcasting information, the interviews have proven that **churnalism** is the only product created by local TV stations. The term applies to media products obtained by mixing press releases, agency news items and articles written by other journalists in a fast, automated and “wholesale” manner, without any minimal verification or personal contribution whatsoever.

*"Our boss might order us to investigate a certain person or firm; even the mayor or the Country Council might ask us to broadcast a certain material. (...)" (Etalon TV Representative, Vâlcea).*

The competition among such media products is not grounded on the relevance of information or the added context. According to the interviewees, competition is speed, objectivity and impact - which can be done by any passer-by witnessing an accident, filming it with the cell phone and posting it online: *"A real journalist knows how to ignore pressure; in broadcast journalism, he is the **first** to get hold of the information and is first **at the scene**; in investigative journalism, he is the one to obtain the information, has the professional and personal ability and strength to write the article **objectively**."* (Andrei Ando, West TV General Manager, Arad).

**2.3.2. Media content: imposed by the owner, dictated by politicians, paid from public funding and generating blackmail.**

Often, the product content has to take into account the owner's political orientation: *"The owner imposes certain, crystal-clear policies: we have to broadcast only certain materials. This TV station is owned by a political party, so how can you expect it to be objective? (...) And it is only natural if the party pays up... Nobody has tried to fire us, because there have not been any cases of insubordination, of attempting to do something other than what the owner's policies require. (...) If you do not like it, you are free to go anywhere else, to an independent TV station, maybe even CNN."* (Muntenia TV Employee, Giurgiu).

In most cases, a journalist's independence is strictly out of the question. *"We are the only TV station that has been assumed by a political leader. (...) Meaning: we create an image exactly the way a political marketing agency would for a leader or a candidate, basically, for the party or for its allies, but we do not broadcast any anti-campaign."* (MIX Group Anchorwoman, Braşov). The broadcast content generated by the TV station can be so politically impregnated that *"At a certain point, you cannot tell who the host and the guest are."* (NCA<sup>3</sup> Representative about Braşov).

Even in the case of TV stations that are not (directly) owned by politicians, the local administration often dictates the content to be broadcast: *"We have advertising contracts with the Town Hall and the County Council regarding news broadcasts for them and, based on those contracts, we look after their interests."* (Valahia TV Journalist, Giurgiu).

Groups of politicians hogging the media content would be inexplicable for the viewers. This is generated by the existence of local elites preferred by the media: *"You see the same people getting invited to TV shows again and again. Then, when elections come, you realize the candidates are the same people. You see the same faces, the same general lethargy and the same never-ending issues."* (Transilvania Group Journalist, Cluj). The explanation: generally, the budget for the TV station depends on these individuals' benevolence as the local public authority has an advertising budget at its disposal: *"Let's say you find out a mayor cut down all the trees in town without authorization and he suggests an advertising contract for a festival - is it moral? I would not know what to say. It might not be moral, but we're all human..."* (Neptun TV Producer, Constanţa).

Media employees are forced to be extremely polite: *"When someone comes into the studio, I always go by the principle that they are a guest in my house, so, obviously, I have to respect and take care of them, not crush them, as I have seen it done on national TV stations. (...)"* Local politicians

<sup>3</sup> National Audiovisual Council of Romania

*simply will not come to your shows, especially if you are being very annoying to them; you can kiss them goodbye.” (Alpha TV Producer, Prahova).*

This vitiated professional environment encourages the emergence of corruption and blackmail. And politicians know they can buy themselves favourable media: *”I wish there were not any blackmailers in the media because they make our lives incredibly difficult. They go and ask for money in exchange for articles and we are also offered money (generally, from political parties) to broadcast the material in a positive note.” (TV Vâlcea 1 News Coordinator).*

The practice of blackmail or the servitude of media employees discredits the media industry.

## **2.4. Editorial hierarchy and the organization of media businesses**

As their numbers are very low, media employees mix the editorial roles with the managerial ones, which can generate conflicts of interests.

*”There is no strict hierarchy in local TV stations. There are several cumulated functions. The administrator is also editor-in-chief, the editor is also producer and reporter. Editors are also hosts, some even make montages, others also film.” (Valahia TV Coordinating Editor, Giurgiu).* It is very unclear who manages a local TV station newsroom or which the internal processes are and who assumes the responsibility: *”Since we are a small team, there is no editor-in-chief. We talk among ourselves so that everything turns out well. There is no leader.” (Muntenia TV Journalist, Giurgiu).*

The quality of a journalistic product resides in clear-cut editorial processes and in a total separation of the editorial work from the business matters. Editorial processes are non-existent in the local press and journalists work hand in hand with the owners. *”We build the news show together with the administration, with the owner of the TV station.” (Etalon TV Journalist, Vâlcea); ”The editorial meetings are held in the newsroom, at a barbecue, at our boss’ house.” (Ana Maria Gâlcă, Oltenia 3 TV Editor-in-Chief, Anchorwoman & TV Host, Dolj).*

Local newsrooms have very few employees, which means the latter are forced to assume multiple positions / roles without any extra pay. *”We are editors and producers, but the salary does not cover both positions. I work longer hours and it is obvious it would be much better for me to have a producer that would back me up and support me. I have to do this and that, not to mention I also have to produce the news.” (Alpha TV Journalist, Cluj).*

The wish to specialize in a field pertaining to a specific institution is highly widespread, to the detriment of generic journalists who bring in news from all fields. The all-time favourite is the field of justice, for instance, which in newsroom speech translates to “lurking” around the Court and Department of the Public Prosecutor and reporting news pertaining to lawsuits, cases, statements of all parties. For some journalists this represents a quality guarantee: *”It is very expensive to have a specialized journalist -justice or the health system - even if his materials are excellent. It is much cheaper to pay a jack-of-all-trades who does not produce any quality materials.” (Cristian Franț, Vest TV Reporter & Producer, Caraș-Severin).* Both organization forms of journalists’ roles are a losing bet both for the proper functioning of the newsroom and for the citizens. Journalism specialization is definitely required, but not as it is done now, focused on authority-generated news that are afterwards broadcast by the newsroom. On the one hand, a journalist who has to obtain daily news pertaining to the justice system cannot allow himself to criticize it because he would lose news and would be avoided by the communicators in the system. On the other hand, a generic journalist simply processes press statements

and cannot specialize in gathering information from a specific field: *"If you send a journalist specialized in politics to do a piece on religion, he will clearly have difficulties."* (Transilvania Live Reporter, Cluj). Another crucial factor pertains to the virtual lack of respect, integrity and credibility a local TV station receives from the community in order to be able to exert pressure on various institutions or politicians so as to force reactions and answers.

The defective delegation of responsibilities in a newsroom and the requirement for speed to the detriment of context turns journalists into propaganda tools for politicians or institutions. At times, the interference between journalists and the structures whose activity they should be following is so deep, that, in the end, they obtain spokesperson or counsellor position in those institutions.

Last, but not least, the interference of the newsroom in securing advertising contracts is a critical issue. Lenormanda Florențiu is editorial coordinator, marketing coordinator and TV Producer at Atlas TV in Vrancea: *"I have to negotiate the advertising sums - this is the most embarrassing task for me."* Paul Dumitru is manager at Muntenia TV and county councillor in Giurgiu: *"I take advantage of the fact that people know me pretty well and I get by. (...) The employees can secure advertising contracts as well; just the other day the girls [the journalists at the TV station - editor's note] obtained several contracts"*.

## 2.5. Human resources

Media employees are, most often, extremely poorly trained, poorly paid and end up adding more income from other activities.

*"They earn some extra money from other firms; for example, in Club Bamboo they film events, take photos, they take care of the sound and the lighting. (...) They are paid separately because the club's activity is generally at the weekend and at night, so they schedule their shifts so as to go in rotation."* (Alpha TV Administrator & Shareholder, Cluj).

The numbers differ from one county to the other, but, according to the interviews, a media employee earns on average between 600 and 1.500 Lei (approximately between 130 and 330 Euros).

*"How can you ask a person who earns six millions [600 Lei - editor's note] to give his best?"* (Former journalist from the print press, Iași).

*"It is hard to ask a journalist who earns 15 millions [1500 Lei - editor's note] a month to jump at a county council president's throat."* (Cristian Franț, Vest TV Reporter & Producer, Caraș-Severin).

In addition to the fact that media employees are miserably paid, their schedule is none the better: *"I cannot think of a practical solution for quality journalism, since, as a journalist in Iași, I end up working around 16 hours a day."* (Radio & TV Journalist, Iași). Many press managers demand journalists to work without a fixed schedule: *"The lack of dedication to their job - there are many journalists who come to work like it were any other job. Unfortunately, you cannot do that. If you come in at 9 and decide to leave at 5, we have a serious problem."* (Transilvania Live Director, Cluj); *"Another problem is the way journalists perceive the press; the fact that they cannot see that the work schedule in the press is not fixed, that they must be quick on their feet and that the subjects approached need to address wide interests."* (Andrei Ando, West TV General Director, Arad); *"Many employees see television work as any common job. You have to pressure them, as many do not understand television*

*work demands you come in at 8 and you leave when the work is done.” (Transilvania Live General Producer, Cluj). Basically, the media employees’ right are generally trampled on.*

Even with minimum wages for the longest hours, many media owners cheat their employees out of their salaries for months on end and, sometimes, never pay up: *”The TV station went through the hands of three companies, all three indebted. The journalists sued them because they had not received their salaries. They had not paid the journalists’ health insurances. I worked there for a while, but did not receive any pay for the last two months.” (Online Newspaper Journalist & Editor, Galați). In 2013, Alpha TV from Prahova ceased its broadcast, after several employees refused to come in to work because they had not received their salaries and decided to sue the owner.*

The journalists’ financial situation often forces them to search for alternatives: *”I work for whoever pays me, like mercenaries or like they do at weddings.” (Muntenia TV Employee, Giurgiu); ”People do not have money, so they accept all sorts of commissions in exchange for articles pro or against.” (Roxana Marosy, Vox TV Manager, Galați).*

An alternative would be political consultancy: *”There are cases and examples of journalists who, during election time, suspend their work contract for a month and become political consultants.” (Știi TV General Producer, Mureș).*

Very few media employees actually retire from the press. *”It is not a field one would like to retire from, since you cannot put money aside for a better coffin.” (Gheorghe Ilaș, Tele Europa Nova TV Producer, Timiș). For many employees, being a journalist is just a step towards the job of party communicator or at the local administration or even that of a candidate on the party lists: ”A journalist sent to a political party might get a tad bit too friendly with that party. There are a lot of journalists that got jobs in the parties they were working on.” (Lia Olguța Vasilescu, Mayor, Craiova, PSD<sup>4</sup>, former journalist).*

Another issue is that, more often than not, media employees have a low level of initiative: *”Political pressure in the media is almost non-existent, many journalists are just very lazy, there is no quality press anymore, so there is no need for political pressure.” (Petronela Axinte, TVT 89 Producer, Timiș).*

Media employees also do not always have sound professional training: *”Basically, they are kids or students that have just graduated from high-school and you have to teach them how to hold a camera, how to work with a mixer. They learn these things from one another.” (Nova Press Group Shareholder, Manager, Editor, Coordinator & Producer, Brașov); ”Cameramen are amateurs, we get them from weddings. You cannot expect to do quality work with a cameraman that cannot adjust the white balancing. Investigative journalism has died and nobody does any minimal instruction.” (Vox TV Journalist, Galați). Most often, good journalists are not used: ”We also have quality journalists, but we do not use them because of the lack of efficiency.” (Constantin Tiberiu Pătru, Oltenia 3 TV General Director, Dolj).*

For many media employees, the wish to remain employed and the lack of knowledge lead to self-censure: *”It was more complicated to preserve your independence at CTV, but not necessarily because of the board, but because of a phenomenon I never understood: a gratuitous, unsolicited obedience to PNL.” (Freelance Journalist, former CTV collaborator, Constanța).*

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<sup>4</sup> Social Democratic Party

All these issues discourage well-prepared and honest journalists from remaining employees of a newsroom for a long time, which, in turn, keeps the average age very low and does not encourage performance or professional continuity. The public perception of the media employee is ruthless: *"The problem is local journalists are perceived as people who could not get a better job, who are uneducated, insolent, stupid, etc. For instance, the guard at the Metropolis told us: get out of here, you illiterates..."* (TVR Correspondent, Dolj).

## 2.6. Local TV station owner or manager

Many times, they get involved in the journalistic act for direct or indirect gain from public funding.

*"In Cernavodă, while working or making public appearances when the current or former mayor was in office, the person that followed him considered me as someone close to him and said it was the mayor's TV station. And I said yes, it is the mayor's TV station, no matter who the mayor is. (...) I see myself as a taxi driver: I do not care who is in the back seat as long as they pay the fare."* (Valentin Coteș, Media TV Owner, Constanța)

The species of press owner or newsroom manager - many times one and the same person - is not, in some cases, very different from the model established by the publication of stenographs of discussions between the media mogul Sorin Ovidiu Vîntu and his employees. For this type of owner, employees are a bunch of soldiers that need to carry out orders for the proper functioning of the business, not to inform the public.

Financially speaking, local TV stations seem to be a losing media business: *"We are a commercial TV station, but I invest 250 million old Lei [approximately 5.500 Euros - editor's note] to continue this dream I have had since childhood."* (Ion Martiș, Atlas TV Owner, Vrancea).

Lack of profit from honest and transparent television business account for the very close relationships between the local TV station, local politics and public funding. *"I am not a shareholder in Litoral TV, but I control it. (...) I support it morally and financially"*. (Nicolae Matei, PSD, Mayor of Năvodari, Constanța County). Even without a political owner, the end-result is the same: *"The owner is often the intermediary between the journalist and the politician."* (Ana Maria Florea, West TV Journalist, Arad).

The interviews we conducted led us to identify the following relevant types of media owners in all 15 counties:

▫ **the political owner** - *"This is a TV station that belongs to an MP. William Brînză owns this TV station."* (Wyl TV Journalist, Prahova); or **the businessman** that goes into business with state institutions - *"In Ploiești, everything was played between two media trusts: Alpha-Telegraful and Prahova. In short, between Luca and Ghiță. Luca is also my godfather."* (Arthur Zafiriadis, Alpha TV former director and formal owner).

▫ **mixed - both owner and editorial director** - *"I am editor-in-chief and minority shareholder, this being the only protection against the fight with political influence. As a shareholder, they cannot fire me."* (Lazăr Faur, Info TV Editor-in-Chief, Arad).

▫ **the front man** - powerless - *"(...) My associate, Mr. Costică Rusu, came in and simply unplugged all the cables without even informing me."* (Elvis Bodea, Impuls TV Owner, Bacău).

Local TV station owners who do not get involved in the editorial content are quite a *rara avis*.

If not politically involved, the media owners claim objectivity, though most often they depend on money obtained from connections with politics: *"I am not credible if I support a certain politician. For this campaign I went to all politicians and got money from contracts concluded with them."* (Life TV Owner, Iași).

The advertising money pushes media owners to also hold the editorial reins: *"I get involved in the agenda / editorial products if the general <<house>> rules are not respected. (...) There are certain subjects which, for commercial reasons, I stopped from being broadcast, because they were not presented properly. I said: <<Take it easy, because that is where we get our bread from >>."* (Valea Prahovei TV Board Representative).

Most interviews have revealed that many media owners come up with various excuses to run the newsroom or even to act as reporters: *"Mrs. Roxana Marosy took over the microphone, as she is a reporter, entered the polling station and started to ask questions."* (NCA Representative, Galați); *"I stopped materials from being broadcast because the journalists were not informed and had not verified the materials thoroughly. Generally, I do not get involved in the editorial agenda."* (Roxana Marosy, Vox TV Manager, Galați).

Media owners or managers do not seem to be aware that there is an ethics or content issue or a need for restructuring the way they do press. Nobody talks about structural changes and the majority identify the origins of problems only outside, not also inside the newsroom. Almost everyone puts their hope in a stronger future economy: *"The root of the problem is economy. If this were a country with a higher life standard, then the press would be more independent."* (Look TV General Production Director, Cluj).

## 2.7. Business model

Captive in a vicious circle of compromise, local TV stations are, most of the time, insignificant audience-wise and lack any credibility, which makes them utterly dependent on the money brought in by the owner and sponsorship from public funding, a.k.a advertising contracts for the local administration or for politicians.

*"Generally, many local TV stations get their funding from advertising contracts and other contracts concluded with the County Council, with the City Hall, with all kind of local organizations that somehow pertain to the City Hall and the funds are politically distributed."* (NCA Representative, regarding Giurgiu County).

Generally, local TV stations are not profitable: *"The monthly profit is 100, 200 million tops and the salaries make up 400 million, taxes included [40 000 Lei, approx. 10.000 Euros - editor's note]. So, it is highly difficult to stand on your own as a local TV station."* (TVS Brașov Representative).

According to the interviewees, the only business model of local TV stations is the sale of advertising space or advertorials (including disguised as news, in many cases), marked or unmarked as advertising. Almost nobody mentions exploring the wide range of possibilities to sell journalistic content.

Local TV stations depend on advertising covered from public funding because *"the big owners, the people who really have the money, we are talking of turnovers of millions of EURO yearly, (...) instead of buying advertising in the press, buy their interests and safety through politicians."* (Cristian Franț, Vest TV Reporter & Producer, Caraș-Severin).

*"If our economic agents did not perceive advertising as an obligation or a sort of offertory box, but as a necessity for their firm and for the support of correct, vertical publications, a great step could be taken." (Andrei Ando, West TV General Director, Arad).*

Basically, the advertising-based model is the following: delivering free content to any audience whatsoever. When the ratings go up, it is sold in a package to anyone who would like to send a message, a package that includes a masked message. The audience is the product. In the local media, because of the lack of studies on audience measurement independently certified, this *product* is more sought out by politicians and administrators of public funding. One reason could be the fact that they do not pay for advertising out of their own pocket or, if they do, the source is probably still public funding.

Many media employees (journalists and managers alike) we interviewed try to convince businessmen that media advertising is crucial to any private business: *"Most businessmen from the private sector are not educated people, they just got the money overnight and do not want any advertising."* (Valahia TV Director, Giurgiu); *"They could not care less about it - they feel word-of-mouth is better than TV advertising."* (Lenormanda Florențiu, Atlas TV Editorial & Marketing Coordinator, TV Producer, Vrancea).

All this represents the reason why a media enterprise is, most often, a business supported primarily from public funding. At a closer look, the sponsorship comes directly or indirectly from public funding.

*"To my knowledge, unfortunately, very few [TV stations - editor's note] support themselves from resources given by the advertising market, so it is either contracts with the City Hall or with the County Council."* (Cristian Georgescu, TTM General Director, Mureș). Sponsorship from public funding sometimes includes also European funds: several TV stations admitted that the equipment and technology used had been bought via non-redeemable EU funds.

Even when a businessman subsidizes from his own pocket a media operation or attracts local advertising, many times the money source might be from business deals with state-owned institutions.

*"If we do find funding, the person or firm has political connections which requires you to have a certain political inclination in the materials you broadcast."* (Simina Roz, TV Arad Journalist).

For these reasons, having a conflict with local politicians could lead to shutting down a TV station: *"If politicians and businessmen make a deal not to have contract with a media institution, that institution will not get money anymore."* (Stelu Iordache, Tele Europa Nova, Timiș).

From the TV stations included in the research, the champion in obtaining public funding is Neptun TV (a station with a predominantly local and regional program and with national coverage), established and owned by Radu Mazăre, the mayor of Constanța: *"TV Neptun receives 2 million EURO per year - public funding from the local administration, either direct, or indirectly, via intermediaries (RAJA, RADET, RATC, etc.). It is utterly subservient to Mazăre and promotes his politics."* (Christian Gigi Chiru, PDL<sup>5</sup> Constanța President).

*"The type of advertising state institutions provide is a political gimmick."* (PNL Constanța Representative).

*"Any mayor that owns any media enterprise will direct advertising straight through his institution or through the firms that have contracts with the City Hall. (...) This is what Sechelariu has done, this is what Stavarache and also Mazăre do."* (Impuls TV Producer, Bacău).

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<sup>5</sup> Democratic Liberal Party

*"Oltenia 3 TV depends on contracts with the local administration by illustrating investments and there is also advertising on a national level. It would be highly difficult without the County Council or the City Hall. The advertising market is weak and the economic development of this town is absolutely deplorable."* (Tiberiu Constantin Pătru, Oltenia 3 TV General Director, Dolj).

The editorial content of such TV stations must please political sponsors and that cannot be too attractive for the audience: *"TV stations in Galati have political affiliations or came about as political accretions. According to a survey done before the political campaign, the maximum audience is 300-500 people."* (Online Newspaper Journalist & Editor, Galați). Independence is out of the question: *"If I come to you and want advertising space and you are someone in the local administration, the second you give me money for advertising I can never broadcast any material about you."* (Oltenia 3 TV Journalist & Producer, Dolj).

Advertising from various and independent sources, though sought by everyone, does not seem to represent a solution even in the eyes of media owners. According to them, even if there were more money from advertising, there would be no radical change in the journalists' situation or that of the media product: *"Economically speaking, if firms invested more in advertising that would probably matter for us, not necessarily the employees, as it would be easier to support ourselves."* (Angela Moldovan, Alpha TV Administrator & Shareholder, Cluj).

There are opinions that perceive the separation from public funding as a solution for an independent media: *"The management of public funds needs to be changed in the political and economic environment; the advertising that is actually masked support of one TV station or another."* (Cecilia Kovacs, NCA Arad Field Inspector).

For others, however, public or private sponsorship is the only way to go. Selling or unionizing content or other business models are not taken into account: *"Local TV station should be financed from the public budget, just like the national television, because they generally depend on contracts made with the local administration."* (Oltenia 3 TV Journalist, Dolj); *"For the press to be independent, it should be backed by shareholders wishing to be Maecenas and that would not protect any sort of interest whatsoever."* (Cristian Georgescu, TTM General Director, Mureș).

This type of mentality is also shared by politicians who, thus, glimpse a media control lever: *"The model should be that of political parties: there should be financing for any TV station on a national level, a certain sum on a county level; it would serve as a guarantee: we tell you you will not receive this money if you break certain rules; so TV stations would sit tight and do their business, as normal. That would be a solution."* (PDL Brașov Representative).

## **2.8. The politicians' mentality towards local TV stations**

Very often is encountered a type of politician that would limit their propaganda function and finance their role as educational institution, though he uses them frequently for political interests.

*"Usually, if you want to be a real politician, you will get yourself a TV station"*, said Sebastian Grapă, PNL Brașov spokesperson at the field documentation.

Romanian politicians often have very clear-cut opinions about the way journalists should behave: *"A quality journalist is (...) a journalist that knows when to be verbally aggressive and when to keep his head down."* (PDL Vâlcea Representative); *"In my opinion, quality journalists should do one simple*

*thing: not interfere in the interviewee's words or comment whatever statements the interviewee had made." (Viorel Chiriac, PSD, Vice-President of Braşov County Council).*

Politicians know very well - from their own experience - the level of trust they should place in the media: *"I do not trust any TV stations because <<I know how it works>>." (PNL Vrancea Representative); "Another issue is also the politicians' mentality ; they perceive mass-media as a sort of toilet paper they can use in political campaigns, then throw away and flush down the toilet." (Online Newspaper Journalist & Editor, Galaţi).*

Politicians are advised to cover their backs by making friendly appearances on TV or by opening their own TV stations.

*"TV stations in Giurgiu are owned directly by politicians or by a clan of intermediaries. The first thing I was told when I came here was to set up my own TV station, otherwise nobody would ever represent me anywhere." (Marin Anton, PDL Giurgiu).*

The stake of political involvement in the media is generally the access to public information and to the management of the budget of public institutions. It is a lottery; in some cases it works and the investment in the press bears fruit, in others it proves ineffectual.

*"TV stations are 100% political, absolutely all of them. In today's Romania, no TV station will make it without political support. There is no such thing as an independent TV station.", said Sebastian Grapă, PNL Braşov spokesperson at the field documentation.*

*"All county party leaders try to control local TV stations by making frequent appearances on TV." (PNL Giurgiu Representative).*

*"When the 2012 budget was voted on at the Târgu Mureş Local Council, we were thunderstruck to see that 1.5 million EURO was being allotted for the entire media." (PSD Mureş Representative).*

Each political side has its own media blockhouse, so, the local media institutions often function on a belligerent mentality: *"I use Mix, that is where I express my ideas, that is where I go and <<kill>> the competition." (Sebastian Grapă, PNL Braşov spokesperson at the field documentation).*

Therefore, local politicians most often do not perceive a talk with media they do not own as a duty to inform their citizens, but as a favour done to the enemy: *"Why should I go to a TV station that virtually distorts the truth and is campaigning against me? To raise its ratings?" (Gheorghe Nichita, PSD, Mayor of Iaşi).*

As any favour, the time a politician offers does not allow for any independent initiatives from the journalist. Such initiatives are considered insolence and can be punished as such: *"I invite you to my house, I give you some coffee, some tea. If you tell lies about me, I will kick your butt down the stairs, from the first floor [that is where the mayor's office is - editor's note]. So I let you into my house and you piss all over me... you can't get away with that." (Matei Nicolae, PSD, Mayor of Năvodari, Constanţa).*

Even if some TV stations are hostile / inimical, some of the local leaders make efforts to preserve them: *"TEN TV is currently in a rather unpleasant financial situation. (...) I asked the person to take it over, so it would not be shut down." (Titu Bojin, President of Timiş County Council).*

Politicians seem to have two main suggestions regarding the media: either limit its propaganda function or finance its role as an educational institution.

The first suggestion is paradoxical. The others' propaganda is the politicians' main concern,

though many politicians do their best to control media institutions and journalists or to control the message that is broadcast: *"We are talking about means to influence idiots, to make them think white is black and black is white. That is all. (...) PSD understood that television is a driving force and that Romanians are that stupid to fall for any kind of crap."* (PDL Galați Member).

To most politicians, the citizen is absolutely incapable of discerning the truth on his own. *"All the manipulation in Romania after the '90s is being done precisely by the media, either consciously or unconsciously. Lately, there have been so many attacks and so much filth that the population is simply flummoxed, cannot tell the impartial press from the partial one, and it is not humanly possible to make a difference between vitiated information and real information, presented by the press."* (Christian Gigi Chiru, PDL Constanța President).

A recurrent subtheme regarding the media propaganda is the world press corruption, as a general model that gives local press a good excuse: *"Show me a TV station that takes money for advertising and then broadcasts material against the financial supporter. Look at the international media. Is CNN an independent TV station? Is Al Jazeera independent? Whatever the backer says goes. (...) There is no solution for an independent press".* (Radu Mazăre, PSD, Mayor of Constanța Municipality, former journalist).

Propaganda and corruption are the reasons why some politicians advocate turning the role of the media into an educational one: *"The media should be educational in its activities, it should stimulate discussion, dialogue and freedom of speech, not lies or <<chats>> about naked women. (...) The media is an incredible force, but it can be manipulated so as to destroy minds, lives, conscience and create other monsters."* (PDL Galați Member).

## 2.9. Tomorrow's journalists

Most often, the media industry despises students who have graduated from Journalism and educators are reluctant and actually refrain from involving the students in the newsroom.

*"In the past, sending four students to Evenimentul Zilei to be trained was a big deal; now it is a shame to send them over there, with Dan Andronic to train them. In the past, sending someone to Cotidianul was a big deal; now it is a shame, since it is just waste paper. And so on and so forth."* (Professor at the Faculty of Journalism within Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași).

*"I have not met in any professional journalists from the Faculty of Journalism in any press institutions in Romania. The exceptions confirm the rule."* (Neptun TV Director, Constanța).

The conflict between Journalism faculties and media institutions has a long history, and the interviews done in the current research attest yet again its existence. There does not seem to be any dialogue between the media industry and universities.

Faculty educators we interviewed criticize the newsroom work, the lack of deontology, the lack of context and quality of journalistic products. They also claim that students are used as a cheap labour.

*"What annoys me the most is the fact that local TV stations often recruit well-prepared students they have no clue how to use or what positions to assign to them." (Writer from Cluj, former Journalism professor).*

On the other hand, veterans in the newsroom claim they have to deal with students who have no practical knowledge whatsoever. And the former are positive this job cannot be learned in universities.

*"A solution for the quality of journalism would be the dissolution of the Faculty of Journalism in Galați. (...) In my opinion, this job is learned as you go, by practicing it." (Alina Brandabur, TV Galați Editor-in-Chief).*

*"I do not believe in Faculties of Journalism, I do not believe in journalism course-books that tell you how to act or how to do something. (...) All the graduates come to us with preconceived ideas, with deontological norms that paralyze any courage they might have. A journalist that lacks courage had better stay home and watch cartoons." (Tele M Producer, Iași).*

Another reproach from the media industry to universities is that *"the educators are people who have not put in even one hour's work in a newsroom or people who have no clue what a newsroom looks like or people who worked in one in the '90s, in the beginning."* (Transilvania Group Journalist, Cluj).

Most media employees we interviewed complain about the lack of specialization opportunities. They say the work is done by *kids* who have just graduated or uneducated youngsters hired only because they accept minimum wages.

## 2.10. The audience is irrelevant

Local TV stations do not invest in measuring the impact of the media product within the communities they serve.

The public or the community do not represent an essential part of the business model developed by local TV stations. The audience is not measured in a credible manner. The interviews have shown that the local community is not among the partners of local TV stations.

Except for Neptun TV (national coverage) regularly benefitting from important public funds from the Constanța administration, no local TV station is part of ARMA<sup>6</sup>. The official reason is the lack of funds: *"As a TV station and newspaper, the costs to have measurements taken and to be able to go to certain agencies with specific figures [audience figures - editor's note] are very high. (...) It is a procedural flaw: there is no money, so you cannot have the audience figures done, so you cannot profit from the national advertising market."* (Valea Prahovei TV Representative).

TV stations make do with measuring their impact on the audience by capitalizing phone calls: *"Someone once asked me to broadcast an ad for them and a week later called and asked to have it taked off the air because he had received tons of phone calls. This would be a way to measure if people watch us or not."* (Valentin Coteț, Media TV Owner, Constanța).

Or they rely on their intuition: *"In certain segments we beat the TV stations in Bucharest, but, since we cannot prove it, advertising agencies do not take us into consideration. Any local TV station, no matter how bad their news broadcast, if it has 2-3 talk-shows (regardless of the quality), the ratings are very high because we are talking about people who live within that community."* (Lazăr Faur, Info TV Editor-in-Chief, Timiș).

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<sup>6</sup> Romanian Association for Audience Measurement

The fact is that nobody knows with absolute accuracy the number of viewers each TV station has, the number of viewers that watch the impact positive news or politicians' attacks have. The entire research exposed indifference regarding the information needs of local communities. In the end, the profit does not come from viewers or audience ratings, but from the local power structure.

## 2.11. Protection and responsibility

Media employees' lack of professional training and lack of putting into effect ethical guidelines have contributed to identifying media laws as a possible protection solution.

Regarding the drafting of specific media laws, the interviewees' opinions are divided, but some of them (for various reasons) support it: *"A media law that also would punish journalists that do not perform their job would be a good idea."* (Iași TV Life Editor-in-Chief).

Media employees complain about politicians, businessmen and media owners' abuses and an overall insecure situation. Politicians often claim they feel attacked by the media. Media owners are driven into a corner because of the lack of advertising. The audience does not seem to be taken seriously either by politicians or by the media.

In default of a body of professional journalists, with continuity in the media, there is no self-regulation from the newsroom, there are no long-term discussions based on journalistic ethics or responsibility towards the local community. The daily work in the media, therefore, exhibits serious deviations from journalistic deontology.

A great part of the interviewees are under the impression that a media law would solve all general and individual problems at once. The wish for a media law is directly connected to the extremely weak professional training and the general lack of minimum professional values within the media.

*"Following brainstorming sessions, we have come up with a deontological guide. It is in the secretarial office. Nobody uses it."* (VTV Media Advisor, Vâlcea).

**Media employee mentality.** *"Why should we not have our own specific laws, to know exactly what we are and are not allowed to do?"* (Valea Prahovei TV Journalist); *"A media law would be welcomed. There should be crystal-clear guidelines as to the rights, role and limitations of the media and journalists alike."* (Simina Roz, TV Arad Journalist).

**Mayor mentality.** *"A media law would be necessary. (...) Ever since libel and insult were taken out of the Penal Code, I can firmly state that the situation has worsened. Meaning, anybody can swear at you simply because you are a public figure."* (Gheorghe Nichita, PSD, Mayor of Iași).

**NCA Inspector Mentality.** *"The instant sanctions were applied, everyone would do their job properly. I have given up believing anything the papers print. I believe what I see on TV because I know someone at NCA is also watching."* (Cecilia Kovacs, NCA Field Inspector).

**Editor-in-Chief Mentality.** *"I believe self-censorship is the essential for any journalist."* (Cornelia Dunăreanu, Banat TV Editor-in-Chief & Shareholder).

**Businessman & Politician Mentality.** *"[Regarding the media law (editor's note)] I am not an advocate of restrictions, but rather of negotiation. When I was running a private firm, I paid for a positive article about the firm to be published. I paid and the article was broadcast."* (PC<sup>7</sup> Galați Representative).

<sup>7</sup> Conservative Party

Unions, a structure which theoretically could protect journalists, is subject to another vicious circle. It is a structure that inspires hope in journalists, but nothing more. Generally, those who would militate in favour of unions expect someone else to create them. And what they have seen so far has destroyed any trust they might have had in current organizations which, however, they have not tried to reform as members, from the inside. *"If there were a real union, I would become a member, but not if we are talking about a bunch of people sitting and drinking and defending media owners."* (1 TV Producer, Bacău).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

**Let's recap.** Most often, if an honest, talented and resourceful TV journalist wishes to independently choose a subject, his job description forces him to limit himself to a report on the activity of the local administration and political parties, extracted from press conferences and other promotional materials.

The method for collecting information they learn in the newsroom is generally official requests, without any lawsuits, complaints, without attempting to create sources, databases and other tools they might use as alternative resources.

The quality of the produced content is, from the very beginning, an extremely low-quality one because of the tight budget, the lack of equipment or of a specialized team.

Organizing the newsroom does not yield itself to any flexibility, since there are very few colleagues that have benefitted from sound training / specialization and many are willing to make compromises because of their meagre salaries.

If, by some miracle, a quality product is indeed made, it might end up not being broadcast at the last minute if the media owner says so. The media owner shows direct editorial involvement when his relationships with the few firms buying advertising time or with the political friends that approve his sponsorship budget from public funding are being threatened.

Politicians and businessmen know this mechanism very well and, consequently, hold journalists cheap and even turn aggressive with those who mess up their PR strategy. Sometimes, politicians do not care a fig about the public either which, in their view, is *stupid*.

Financially speaking, most TV stations are not profitable and the salaries are critically low. Most often, the operational budget is sponsored from public funding, either directly or indirectly, the TV station does not enjoy any credibility whatsoever and the audience figures are insignificant.

Could a way out of this catch-22 be a new generation who has graduated from university? Hard to believe. Generally, the industry loathes the Faculty of Journalism as an institution. And the feeling is mutual.

### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

This detailed study identifies a media system that does not focus on informing the citizen and exposing the abuses of power systems. As seen from the interviews taken, the media is rather part and parcel of a corrupt power system that includes politicians and administrators of public funds and private companies who finances and use it as a propaganda tool.

Identified problems can be turned into opportunities for both independent journalists and local communities.

Nevertheless, a change in mentality is in order. Journalists would be more successful if they started out from the question: *"What information needs are there in the community I work in?"*, instead of: *"Who does the paying?"*.

Below we have put together some poignant issues and our recommended solutions.

**Problem:** The information reaching the public reflects official viewpoints, unfiltered by the journalist.

**Solution:** Public authorities communicate information that will reflect their activity in as positive a light as possible. Most often, this information is either incomplete, distorted or completely false. That is why any information from any public authority must be critically approached and independently investigated.

Focus on the information needs of local communities and innovative means to deliver content.

**Problem:** Politicians' refusal to participate in TV shows or debates.

**Solution:** Quantify public statements, promises or statements made on TV stations that cover the back of the politician. Create a False Statement Map using the model provided by the Center for Public Integrity<sup>8</sup>. For technical support, you can contact groups of programmers and activists for free programs that promote information spatialization and mapping<sup>9</sup>.

Or create an application to centralize politicians' statements and open it to verifications made by the community<sup>10</sup>.

**Problem:** Lack of transparency in communication from the Police, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Court and other institutions.

**Solution:** Document the process for request of information (date, time, the identity of the person refusing to provide that information; if possible, audio / video recording or request the refusal in writing). Communicate the specific data and ask for a lawyer's support or that of a specialized organization that could centralize and promote<sup>11</sup> and assist you in taking legal action with direct complaints against the institution and responsible person.

**Problem:** Law 544/2001 regarding free access to information of public interest most often does not work or present implementation issues.

**Solution:** Often, the law does not work not just for journalists and it is not a problem just here in Romania. It is a business opportunity for a small group of journalists to specialize in requests for information and in following up the responses, including collaboration with lawyers in order to call public servants that abuse their position of power to account for their actions. There are several such initiatives, some led by NGOs, others designed as businesses: [www.muckrock.com](http://www.muckrock.com), [www.whatdotheyknow.com](http://www.whatdotheyknow.com), [www.foiamachine.org](http://www.foiamachine.org).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.publicintegrity.org/2008/01/23/5641/false-pretenses](http://www.publicintegrity.org/2008/01/23/5641/false-pretenses)

<sup>9</sup> For example, see [www.geo-spatial.org](http://www.geo-spatial.org), [www.ceata.org](http://www.ceata.org).

<sup>10</sup> A model is available on [www.publicinsightnetwork.org/](http://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/) or on [www.factcheck.org/](http://www.factcheck.org/).

<sup>11</sup> For example, see [www.apador.org](http://www.apador.org), [www.activewatch.ro](http://www.activewatch.ro).

The NuVăSupărați.info website is an information and education resource as well, regarding the drafting and delivery of requests for public information, a website that can help you obtain and publish the required information.

If you come against unwillingness or lack of reaction from institutions in providing public information, the next step is not to cease communication, but act in accordance with the law (administrative complaint, bring the action before the administrative court, etc.). In order to call the management to account for the abuse of power you can also resort to legal counsel.

**Problem:** Dependence on official sources that refuse to communicate.

**Solution:** Information is not restricted to one place. There are mandatory databases that various institutions have to have and there are press releases they have to provide. Information can be retrieved from various points of official communication (the Official Gazette, Portal of Law Courts, etc.) and from direct contact with people involved (for instance, the lawyers of the parties that went to court). Request organization of training courses on obtaining information from professional journalist organizations.

Another solution would be to create a local representative group of transparent and professional people that are respected within the community (judge, policeman, spokesperson) that would regularly collect journalists' complaints and pressure the colleagues within the system.

**Problem:** The need for a strong union and the lack of trust in the current structures.

**Solutions:** You have three options - either set up your own union, or become members of an existing organization and get involved in its reformation, or become members of a European union. Choose an organization you trust or one that you believe can be reformed, after having closely investigated its status. Together with several colleagues, become members so as to have a say in the organization and can get involved in monitoring its activity. Invest in a yearly subscription as that will guarantee support. Constantly ask for transparency in decision-making and the manner in which the budget is used within that organization.

**Problem:** Advertising only sells on national television.

**Solution:** Local TV stations are a niche national television cannot cover. Come up with alliances and networks that can generate quality products on a local level for local audience. Invest money in measuring your audience.

**Problem:** The business model based exclusively on advertising funds exposes quality journalism to risks / pressure that might have a negative effect. The context of the local media amplifies these risks, the private advertising market being still under-developed and, thus, contributing to the consolidation of the private mass-media dependency on public fund advertising or on the sponsorship of media owners connected with politicians or owners from politics.

**Solution:** In countries with a more consolidated democracy there is a non-profit type of television or television as a local public service called *community TV*. How it works: the city hall pays for the

required space and technology, together with a group of technicians to assist those wishing to use the studio, while the audiovisual authority forces cable operators to include the community TV channel in the coverage area. The TV station has editorial and deontological regulations and anyone who abides by them can schedule and do their show, thus broadcasting independent content and receiving the necessary technical assistance. This model can be re-thought in the Romanian context, so that there is the possibility to create a community service and guarantee its independence.

Moreover, a new concept is that of crowd-funding: people interested in a subject / product or an idea support it financially. So, adapt the crowd-funding model to your journalistic ideas.

**Problem:** Lack of protection. Lack of training / specialization courses.

**Solution:** Invest time and resources into becoming members or associates of umbrella organizations that handle journalist protection and training (such as instruction in techniques of information collection). If national organizations prove unsatisfactory, you can become member or correspondent for similar organizations abroad.

**Problem:** Materials do not reach the community.

**Solution:** Open your journalistic operation to the community. Create a News Café. Organize regular events showing how you documented materials or what the encountered problems are. Offer training / specialization courses focusing on writing and editing, test new tools, prepare *tool-kits* for involved citizens who wish to participate in the documentation process of a newsroom.

**Problem:** There are no internship opportunities for Journalism students.

**Solution:** Create online student publications, focused on the local community and engage independent journalists as trainers. The *teaching hospital* model is described in the specialized literature and can be implemented via a partnership between the University and independent journalist associations.

**Problem:** The newsroom cannot attract better prepared young people.

**Solution:** Create a paid internship program for students from any faculty, not just Journalism and attract young specialists from various fields that can learn writing, editing and deontology rules.

**Problem:** There is no business model for the media.

**Solution:** This is a global issue. Connect yourselves to international information channels that suggest and test solutions. Possible sources: [www.niemanlab.org](http://www.niemanlab.org), [journalistsresource.org](http://journalistsresource.org), [civic.mit.edu](http://civic.mit.edu), [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org), [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org). Connect yourselves to current media labs (see a Romanian example on [thesponge.eu](http://thesponge.eu)) or create your own regional lab together with groups of programmers, activists, etc.

Publicly and constantly discuss personal and well-known cases using specific information. Document any incident you might perceive as hindering you to do your job. Build everything brick by brick. The public does not know about your financial situation, about the TV station propaganda, about the resource-less newsroom work, about the friendly relationships between politicians and media owners. And for sure it is not aware about materials you worked on and were never broadcast.

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The present report does not set out and cannot be exhaustive. As information validated from sources as diverse as possible is crucial, we have decided to open part of the data in the present report for editing in an interactive map available at [www.activewatch.ro/freeex](http://www.activewatch.ro/freeex). Therefore, we invite you to join us and contribute to the development of ideas and information presented in this report. Write to us at [freeex@activewatch.ro](mailto:freeex@activewatch.ro) and add to or correct the information included in this report.



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