Rooted in normative ethics, the concept of media transparency is generally defined as one of the key requisites for credible media practices that are based on trust between the media representatives and their audiences (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2009). However, giving a formal definition to professional standards and values, normative conceptualization may also represent serious difficulties in inculcating substantial ethical values in individual journalists and in the profession as a whole (Black & Barney, 1985).

This work is aimed at understanding of the phenomenon of media transparency through the experiences and interpretations of Ukrainian media practitioners - individuals involved in constitution of the phenomenon by their ethical judgments, shared values and informal rules that work in practice. Specifically, this interpretative study seeks to answer the following research question: how do Ukrainian media practitioners understand and interpret the phenomenon of media transparency and how they perceive their professional role in the existing practices? Based on the case of Ukraine, I elaborate the understanding of media transparency phenomenon as it is constructed by journalists’ professional experiences, perceptions, attitudes, values and ethical considerations that work in practice.

The study is built on the methodology of grounded theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Corbin, & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006) and applies methods of individual interviews and focus-group discussions with media practitioners in Ukraine as well as the elements of creative art-based method. Qualitative methodology was utilized to allow study participants express their views and tell their stories, reflecting what they experience in their work and explaining me how they understand the phenomenon under investigation.
The research indicated the difference between normative ethics and routine ethical considerations of the practitioners. Working in media and interacting with each other and other professionals, Ukrainian journalists construct and share the meanings of the practices and ethical considerations about those practices. Even though media practitioners demonstrated their familiarity with the norm of transparency, formalized in ethical code, and characterized it as important for professional ethics, their professional stories and examples illustrated that a ‘practical’ meaning of transparency, journalists construct and share in their every day activities, is different from its normative conceptualization.

First, the perceived transparency is usually limited to the idea of media independency and do not include the idea of visible news making process. Besides, the difference is especially clear when it comes to the pressures that happen on organizational (inter- and intra-) level and do not involve journalists` individual decisions. The difference also concerns a rare inclusion of audience and the concept of public interest (needs and demands) into discussion about media transparency.

Based on the interviews and focus group discussions` findings, in Ukraine the non-transparency has shifted on “higher” level (intra- and inter-organizational) making journalists less involved into decision-making process. Moreover they tend to justify the practices that happen beyond their decisions and participation perceiving them as normal and acceptable. It creates new challenges for counteraction against media transparency. As a result, verbally and visually participants created rather a pessimistic picture of media situation in Ukraine describing pressures as common and omnipotent and showing journalist as weak and powerless.

The figure of journalist was often depicted as powerless, manipulated, and speechless. Journalists do not judge about unethical influences and pressures as about the practices that concern “me”, “my own work” and do not perceive them as “my professional problem” and “my” professional reality. non-transparent practices are constituted as the ones caused by the external forces (that are usually hard to overcome) rather than through the notions of personal involvement, shared practices, its effects and consequences.
According to the study results, the pressures should be taken as one of the main obstacles for Ukrainian journalism development and professionalization. The transformation of the experienced pressures influences ethical considerations of journalists. In this situation media and journalists lose their professional role of gatekeepers; influences happen beyond journalists’ professional decisions, so journalists feel themselves less responsible for accepting (or not accepting) non-transparent practices. As a result, Ukrainian journalists seem to be demobilized and demotivated to struggle against pressures, follow ethical standards and improve their professional level.

The study has also shown a kind of relativeness of ethical rules when it comes to the issues of pressures and non-transparent practices. Meanwhile normative concept of transparency, claiming for visibility of news production, places news consumers (audience) at the center of discussion, public interests seem not to be perceived in the same way by media practitioners participated in the study. Besides, speaking about the issues of transparency, journalists tend to pay much attention to the reasons and actors of experienced media practices. Meanwhile, they almost never mentioned the outcomes and results of the journalism that works under the pressure. When sounded, the results were usually associated with personal reputation of journalist and did not refer to audience, public interests or reputation of media organization, its credibility, and professional and business success. Therefore, journalists did not mention the value of media credibility and public interest in light of the influences that are practiced in media.

Hence, this work goes beyond the explanation of media transparency as a “given” normative concept, involves practitioners into articulation and making sense about the ethical issue they face and experience. Concentrating on journalists’ personal values and interpretations, applied in practical decisions, it shifts emphasis away from “normative” examination of media transparency as static and objectively existing phenomenon and focuses on understanding transparency through the lenses of subjective meanings and interpretations that journalists employ in their decisions.

As a young post-soviet country and developing democracy, today’s Ukraine should be approached as a case where the value system is emerging from combination of old and new rules, keeping transforming and adapting to conditions of an imperfect free market, a
disoriented society and an immature democracy. It makes the work of individual media professionals both complicated and interesting for investigation. Aimed at exploration of professional choices and challenges journalists face in Ukraine, this study contributes into understanding of Ukrainian practice from the position of people, working in media, and sheds some light on their experiences, purposes and conditions behind their everyday decisions.

Key words: media ethics, media transparency, media in Ukraine, media freedom, journalism and media in Post-Soviet countries, qualitative study, interpretative study, individual ethics, normative ethics.