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**From State Censorship to Pressure of Money:
New Challenges for Media Transparency in Ukraine**

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Abstract

The paper reviews the transformation of non-transparent influences experienced by media professionals in Ukraine within the normative concept of media transparency. The author also discusses the professional role of journalists in light of these transformations. As the decision about coverage is often shifted to „higher“ level of owners and inter-organisational-level-negotiations, journalists loose their professional role in gate-keeping process, and news sources (government, political parties or business organisations) manipulate media organisation as a whole. In this situation the way journalists perceive, understand and interpret the practices in which they are involved and their roles in these practices become especially important, as does their ability to recognise the pressure and take an active position in counteraction against cases of non-transparency.

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1. Introduction

Media independence and media transparency are still open to question in Ukraine. The state intervention into media practice comes from Soviet tradition of total control and media censorship. In independent Ukraine governmental pressures occurred through the practice of „temnyky“ (direct instructions on the topics for coverage widely used in 2003-2004), and since then, after the Orange revolution in 2004, direct political pressures has been partly replaced by owner censorship and „censorship of money“. Being owned by big business and learning to work in new market conditions, Ukrainian media remains a primary platform for political elites and business interests.¹ For most of them, the motivation to use media for influence supersedes business or private interests. Thus, as owners influence editorial policies, media are increasingly under their direct control.

Today government intervention into media content and policy as well as private pressures has become a threat to media institutions' integrity and media transparency. Public broadcasting that could become a positive example of independent and socially responsible media practice has not been established yet. In addition, media activists and civil society organisations are still lacking power and experience to defend media freedom; the mechanisms of professional self-regulation do not always work effectively.

This article provides an overview of pressures on media in contemporary Ukraine within the framework of the normative concept of media transparency.² The roles of media practitioners and development of professional journalism are discussed in light of transformations of influences on media in the country.

2. Media Transparency Concept: Types and Levels of Influence

The concept of transparency is critical in ethics of communication. The ideas of motion and visibility are central for transparency. In Latin „transparent“ means *trans* – „through“ and *parere* – „appear“; „transparency“ is translated as „visible“ „movement“. Patrick Plaisance explains that transparency addresses *content* of messages as well as *form* and *nature* of interactions.³ How do you know what you know? Who are your sources? How direct is their knowledge? What biases

¹ GROMADZKI ET AL. 2010

² KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2004

³ PLAISANCE 2008



might they have? Are there conflicting accounts? KOVACH 2001 poses these questions as determinants of the Rule of Transparency.

Being primarily based on the notions of truth and honesty, media transparency is usually approached from a *normative* position: media practices are explored as ones which may or may not violate formally specified norms and professional standards.¹ KOVACH 2001 notes that disclosure of sources and methods, biases and conflicting accounts affect media transparency. Professional values, such as absence of any direct and indirect influence, are placed as a central condition of media transparency by the concept offered by KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2004.

Media is considered to be transparent when: 1) there are many, often competing sources of information, 2) much is known about the method of information delivery, and 3) information about the funding of media or media productions is publicly available.² Non-transparency is defined as any form influence on editorial decisions that is not clearly indicated in the finished product of the media.³

Previous research around the world has identified that non-transparent media practices may be both direct and indirect influences. Direct influences are cash or other monetary payments for news coverage, as based on the research by KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2003. Indirect influences include publication or production of materials in exchange for paid advertising, conflict of interests, when a journalist is employed by media and a company, institution, government, or public relations agency, pressure from the advertising departments of media on editors in regard to which news from which sources to cover, and financial and psychological pressure from news sources on the media to present the information that they desire.⁴

Journalists can experience both direct and indirect pressures in terms of which news to cover at three different levels. At the interpersonal level news sources can offer them money, meals, or products and services for their coverage.⁵ At the intra-organisational level, journalists can be asked by their editor, media-advertising department, or publisher to cover or ignore publicity activities.⁶ Finally, at the inter-organisational level, journalists can be forced to write or not to write news stories about certain companies or political parties because these companies have or do not have formal contracts with the media outlet to „provide informational services“.⁷

¹ TSETSURA 2005a, HARRO-LOIT/SAKS 2006, KLYUEVA 2008, TSETSURA/GRYNKO 2009, TSETSURA/ZUO 2009

² KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2004

³ KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2003

⁴ TSETSURA 2005b

⁵ LO/CHAN/PAN 2005

⁶ TSETSURA 2005a

⁷ KLYUEVA 2008

3. Journalism in Ukraine: Transformation of the Pressures

Escalating professional and public discussions on media transparency in Ukraine are usually referred to as autonomy from political and financial pressures, professionalism and maturity of Ukrainian journalism. Since Ukraine became an independent state in 1991, Ukrainian media has entered new era of transforming from an ideology-governed system to development and survival in new market conditions. „The heads of many journalists – and, indeed, our entire national informational space – are littered with vestiges of Soviet propaganda, on the one hand, and contemporary informational junk, pop culture, and bad taste, on the other“.¹

When the transition from state-owned to private hands was over, it became evident that it did not bring expected liberty. Marta Dyczok notices, „that many new media outlets were created for purpose of influence rather than to provide the public with information or generate profits“.² The Ukrainian slang word „dzhynsa“ was coined in 1996, when written-to-order articles started appearing. This pseudo-journalism was at its most brutal in 1999, during Leonid Kuchma’s second bid for the presidency. „Dzhynsa“ usually indicated corrupted journalism and mainly concerned direct (cash for news coverage) influences on journalists.

4. Government Intervention and „Temnyky“

At the end of 2001, the sources of influence were concentrated mainly in the hands of state authorities that started to use administrative power to influence media. Centralised censorship and so called „*temnyky*“ appeared. „Temnyky“ practice could be classified as indirect (non-monetary) influences that happened on an inter-organisational level. Specifically, the President’s Administration pressed media organisations with formalised instructions about frames for news coverage.

In 2003 Ukraine was placed 19 (out of 33 countries) and tied with Argentina, Mexico, and Taiwan in the global index of media bribery.³ Ukraine scored low on the perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption laws, professional education of journalists, existence of well-established and enforceable journalism codes of ethics, and free press and free flow of information.

The journalists’ revolution that started in October 2004 was directly connected with the political events in the country and united journalists who refused to accept pressures and work under political censorship. In October 2004, Ukrainian media communities initiated the action supporting the journalists of the 5th Channel, which was under the strong political pressure at that time. As a result, on November 21, the 5th Channel began broadcasting the events on Maidan [central square in Kyiv] where more than 20 thousand Ukrainians came to sup-

¹ IVSHINA 2008

² DYCZOK 2009, p. 21

³ KRUCKEBERG/TSETSURA 2003



port Yushchenko, a presidential candidate from the opposition. The protests were supported by international journalists' organisations.¹ Finally, the journalists' revolution caused the liquidation of centralised government censorship, but that didn't bring media independency.

5. „Censorship of Money“ and „Whole-sale“ System

After 2004 the problem of influence was shifted from direct government intervention to indirect influences intra-organisational – level relations between the media owner and journalists. Alexander Belyakov states that „censorship of money“ started from the 2000s when oligarchs or just advertisers manipulated media with the goal of making a profit.² SUMAR 2008 also writes about the „censorship of money“ that has changed government pressure in Ukraine and notes that the election campaign in 2007 was followed by a significant growth of paid-for media coverage“.

Ukrainian oligarchs who own media manipulate editorial policy according to their private interests and also allow manipulation by third parties if paid.³ Therefore, in 2008 the Media Sustainability Index evaluated media sustainability in Ukraine the lowest since 2001. Victoria Sumar claims that, „there used to be censorship by government; now it is censorship by money... Before, the censorship of the powerful was performed by the stick. Then those in power came to realise that the stick is too crude, and the journalists were starting to resist. So they started to exercise it with the carrot, as money is much more pleasant, and it is hard to refuse. But we should not forget: this is the same censorship“.⁴

An exploratory study of media transparency conducted in 2008 provided evidence of non-transparent practices in Ukraine and classified them within the existing framework of levels and types of media non-transparency.⁵ Indirect pressures that happen on intra-organisational were indicated as the most frequent types of influences. These influences mainly occur in the form of pressures from the owner and marketing/advertising departments that control editorial policy.

„Dzhynsa“ has moved on the inter-organisational level: journalists and even editors have become less involved in the decision-making process. Non-transparent influences have been transformed from „retail“ into „wholesale system“. „All agreements and payments between media and headquarters take place at the level of owners or, more rarely, of top managers. Journalists, having accepted payments, protest little and service the needs of politicians. Most principled journalists are squeezed out of the profession“, – claims Otar Dovzhenko.⁶As a

¹ LIGACHOVA/GANZHA 2005

² BELYAKOV 2009

³ BELYAKOV 2009

⁴ UKRAINE MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX (MSI) 2008

⁵ TSETSURA/GRYNKO 2009

⁶ UKRAINE MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX (MSI) 2010



result, business news as well as new from NGOs and information about social projects is simply ignored if it is not paid for.

6. Recent Events: Temptation to Control

According to the recent research conducted by the Democratic Initiative Foundation¹, although there is no formal censorship in the media it does exist „informally“. Media experts and activists state that governmental control is one of the main challenges of media transparency in the country today. Based on the monitoring of daily TV news, Ukrainian NGOs (Internews Network, Telekrytyka and the Mass Information Institute) find signs of biases in TV news and state that censorship policy is mostly aimed at forming a positive image of the government. In the report titled „Either praise or in no way“² NGOs conclude that Ukrainian TV Channels follow two main lines – produce positive coverage about authority and criticise opposition. A sociological poll conducted in September 2010 shows that 41 % of Ukrainians recognise the decrease of freedom of speech after the presidential elections compared to results in April 2010 when just 18 % of citizens believed that there was a problem with freedom of press in the country.³ According to another survey conducted by the Razumkov Center, more than 55 % Ukrainians agree that political censorship exists in the country.⁴

International organisations also express their concern about increase in press freedom violations. In the report of a fact-finding visit to Ukraine in summer 2010 titled „Temptation to Control“,⁵ the international organisation Reporters without Borders expresses concern about the increase in attempts to directly obstruct the media, including physical attacks on journalists and allocation of broadcasting licenses as a means of censorship: „acts of censorship that favour the new government have been growing steadily in the strategic broadcasting sector. In most cases, it has been the management itself that told staff not to broadcast certain stories or to eliminate passages critical of the government.“ The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic has marked media „self-censorship“ as one of the topical problems of free media in Ukraine and mentioned that Ukrainian media tend to publish less critical materials about government.⁶ As EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Fuele stated in a recent interview, the European Union looks to Ukraine improving on the situation with the freedom of expression in the country.⁷

¹ THE DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVE FOUNDATION 2010

² TELEKRITIKA 2010

³ SOCIOLOGICAL GROUP “RATING” 2010

⁴ RAZUMKOV CENTRE 2010

⁵ REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2010

⁶ VOICE OF AMERICA 2010

⁷ THE UKRAINIAN NEWS AGENCY 2010

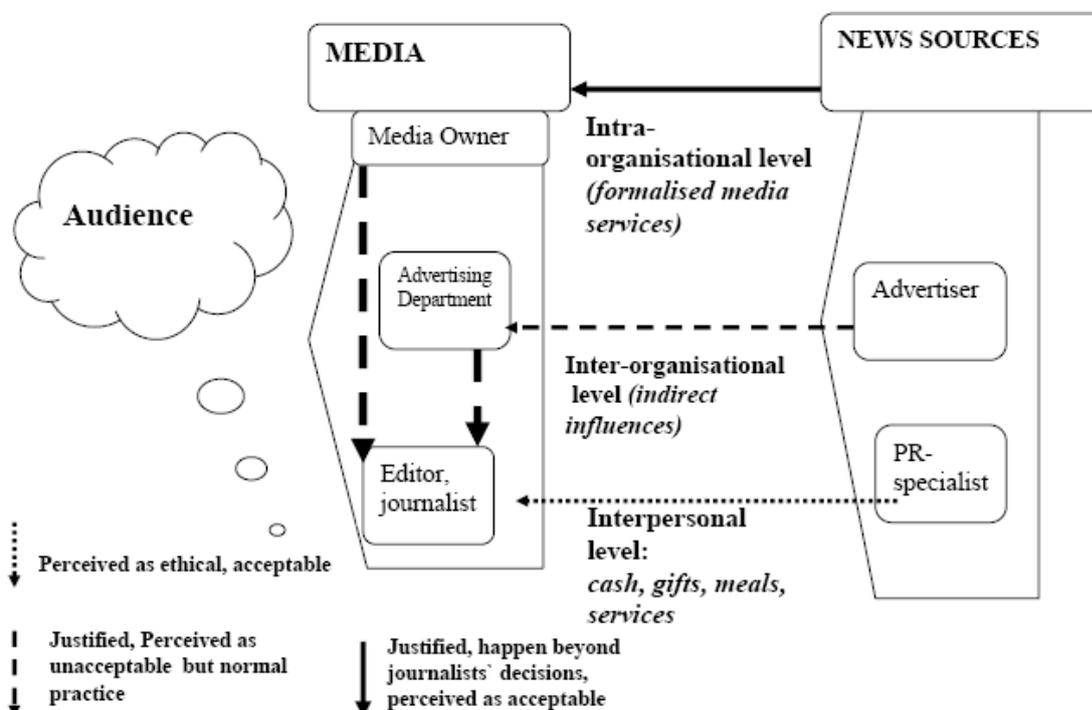


7. Ukrainian Journalists: Roles and Justifications

If one looks at the changing influences on media in Ukraine, the step-by-step transformation to inter-organisational-level influences becomes visible. It means that journalists are losing their role in the gate-keeping process; the decision about coverage is often made on the „higher“ level of owners or is a result of inter-organisational level negotiations, where news sources (government, political parties or business organisation) manipulate media organisation as a whole. In this situation, the way journalists perceive, understand and interpret the practices in which they are involved and their roles in these practices become especially important, as well as their ability to recognise the pressure and take active position in counteraction against the cases of non-transparency.

A recent qualitative study conducted in Ukraine has shown that journalists tend to perceive as normal (and acceptable) the practices that happen on the inter- or intra-organisational level and are beyond their individual decisions.¹ The study participants often justified their involvement in non-transparent practices by citing personal or organisational financial struggles, professional immaturity and undeveloped media market.

Graph 1:
Non-transparent Media Practices as Perceived
by Ukrainian Journalists
within the Media Transparency Normative Framework



Source: GRYNKO 2009

¹ GRYNKO 2009



Direct influences occurring on an interpersonal level (that are rare in conditions of media „self-censorship“) are mainly evaluated as unacceptable and non-transparent by media practitioner (see Graph 1). In this case journalists' attitudes stay in line with media transparency normative conceptualisation. Nevertheless, journalists feel less responsible for the practices of indirect influences on both intra – and inter-organisational levels. So, media practitioners tend to evaluate the non-transparent practices that happen on a „higher“, inter-personal level as more acceptable and ethical.

Therefore participants quite often perceive pressures inside the organisation (inter-organisational level) as normal and find the reasons to tolerate it. The study indicated the difference between the practices that are not transparent by their nature and the ways they are interpreted by practitioners. It primarily concerns intra-organisational and inter-organisational-level influences. Being non-transparent by the normative concept, these influences are perceived as acceptable and transparent on an individual level. Mainly they happen beyond practitioners' personal decisions, and that is why are rarely counteracted.

8. Conclusions

Discussing the freedom of press in Ukraine, DYCZOK (2009, p. 10) writes that „despite decades of communist rule, the desire for free speech and understanding its importance for democracy survived in this society“. However money pressure, journalists' apathy and lack of professional autonomy are the major risks for freedom and transparency of press today. „Journalists haven't realised their responsibility to the society; in recent years, most of them were busy increasing their wealth but not improving professional skills“, – stated Ukrainian journalist Vitaliy Portnikov in the Media Sustainability report.¹

Working under pressures that are usually beyond the practitioners' decisions, Ukrainian journalists are often lacking autonomy, intention and power to initiate reforms in the country. The non-transparency has mainly shifted to a „higher“ level (intra- and inter-organisational) and journalists become less and less involved into decision-making process. Moreover, they tend to justify some of the practices that happen beyond their decisions and participation perceiving them as normal and acceptable. It makes for new challenges for counteraction against media transparency in the country. Meanwhile media owners are just learning to work in market conditions and usually do not consider media transparency and media independency as essential for business success. It is hardly debatable that working in such conditions Ukrainian media still do not play the role of „agent of democratic change“ in the country.

¹ UKRAINE MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2008



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