



CENTRUL PENTRU  
**JURNALISM  
INDEPENDENT**

# THE STATE OF ROMANIAN MASS-MEDIA 2020



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**The State of Romanian Mass-Media, 2020**

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## 1. Synopsis

With very few exceptions, the Romanian media seems caught in a time tunnel, between two fundamental problems that feed themselves, in a vicious cycle: the lack of funding and the loss of credibility. If in the 2015 report journalists were saying that 'It can't get any worse', the 2016-2019 proved it can.

The profession is dominated by a struggle between exhaustion and a feeling of irrelevancy, on one hand, and a conviction in the primary mission of journalism - that of informing your audience and serving the public interest. "We are too poorly paid to not do our jobs properly; there's no other reason for staying," says part of the community. "We are too poorly paid to die in the trenches," argue those who decide to leave to other, more fulfilling professions, or those who gave up and became just 'information accountants'.

If we just look at the number of outlets, Romanian media may seem very much alive and very diverse. In theory, there's an incredible richness of content. But a more detailed analysis shows a lack of content with high value for the community. If in the United States they talk about '*news deserts*', cities with only one newspaper or no more local media, Romania apparently has the opposite problem. There's a multitude of small, fragmented media sources, that publish a lot of information - but most of the time they're just press releases.

The dilution of journalism is one of the fundamental problems of Romanian media. Competing against social networks, the media chases online traffic with tons of news articles, but without much focus on public interest.

The hard years of economic crisis, the political control, the loss of expertise and of standards, alongside a lack of support from the public, left deep scars on the profession. Newsrooms are understaffed and the editorial beats are almost gone. Many senior journalists left either for better paying jobs, that also offer greater professional satisfaction, or towards the new wave of media startups.

This new wave of fresh publications, created by journalists that left mainstream institutions to open their own media outlets, grew and became more visible. They also reached a point where the expectations are higher, but the resources - from money and time to people - are still limited and their model cannot be replicated on a large scale or sustain long-term growth.

The political sphere continues to exert control over a good part of the media, either through a direct influence, or, most often, through the ad budgets they assign to them, or not. As there are no alternative sources of income, self-censorship is felt in many newsrooms.

Even if the Romanian media outlets usually show a single point of view, you can't really hide information anymore. But in order to be informed properly, the public is forced to become itself a 'media professional', to do its own work of

reporting, by filtering the multitude of information streams without context that reaches it.

The media industry is also facing serious management problems, for various reasons. Either the human resource is not available, or very expensive, or, in the case of politicised media institutions, it's not even wanted. When the press becomes an instrument in the political arena or in the business world, good media managers are not only useless, they're an actual danger to the owners' interests.

The business sector is disconnected from the local media and doesn't see a profit in investing in advertising in the traditional press, preferring the much cheaper alternative of tech giants Google and Facebook. Furthermore, this option is 'safer' because it doesn't attract the attention of local politicians or that of rival publications.

The relation between the media and the public is more and more diluted and the phenomenon of sinking into editorial and ideological bubbles is felt ever more strongly. The circulation of print media is in freefall and the online traffic is made with death reporting and sensationalism. Even the financial support for the new media startups is often seen as a 'reward' for the journalists perceived as part of the same ideological bubble.

## 2. Introduction

This report examines the problems facing the Romanian mass-media, derived from interviews with over 80 journalists, managers and professionals in academia, conducted in 22 cities over the period between September 2019 – February 2020. Some of them asked for anonymity in order to speak freely and to avoid local repercussions, so a few of the quotes are unattributed.

The report has a four year scope and identifies several main problems: a lack of funding and of a sustainable business model; a lack of expertise and of journalistic standards from understaffed newsrooms; a diminishing trust in the media caused by its capture by interest groups with no connection to public interest journalism.

We could see the following document as a ‘tale of despair’ and a demonstration of ‘how bad the media is’, or we could use it as a starting point for a discussion the Romanian society needs to have with all those involved. No matter how obsolete the old, classical media may seem, in this modern context of attractive social media, communities and democracy as a whole depend on journalism. The need for verified information and for context is the same – if not higher. The need of journalists that keep a watchful eye on the activity of the state is still the same. A study<sup>1</sup> published in 2018 in the United States showed that the disappearance of local media led to increased spending by public authorities and to less civic involvement in those communities.

What changed is the perception of the public regarding its need for journalism. From the moment information started to flow ‘freely’ around us, and models of good journalism became ever so rare, the public distanced itself from journalism. We entered a vicious cycle, described in detail in the following pages. Media institutions lost both their ad money and the money from buying customers, and public interest started to be replaced by economic or political interests. Media outlets that had a critical voice regarding those in power – a basic mission for a media institution – lost their strength, some of them disappeared, and others are just trying to survive. In these 10 years of continued decline, the noise level grew, offering just an ‘illusion of information’, as one journalist calls the enormous wave of worthless information flooding our communities, but leaving every one of us less informed.

The report analyses the different roles played by media moguls and managers, the economic crisis in 2008-2009, the disappearance of private advertising, journalism departments, and the educational system in general. We will also look at how politicians use public money as an instrument of media control. But in these next paragraphs, we also need to look critically at us, ‘the public’.

The *Colectiv* moment – the tragic fire in a Bucharest club that resulted in 64 deaths, the incompetence and corruption of authorities, followed by repeated

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<sup>1</sup>[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3175555](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3175555)

attempts of some politicians to capture the judiciary system woke a large part of Romanian civil society. For three years, hundreds of thousands of people defended democracy in the street. And many journalists, from the mainstream press or the new media startups, did what they knew best – they reported, wrote, went on television and radio and showed the public what didn't work, the abuses, and the illegalities they uncovered. Even so, both sides felt alone. In the wide sea of captured voices, the journalists doing their job honestly are hard to see and hear. And even the public, no matter its ideological spectrum, is contributing to this, by lifting the aggressive forms of journalism to the level of 'good practices', of normality. At the same time, the citizens felt alone and misrepresented in the media.

Imagine either a world in which the information available to us is decided by politicians and private companies; in which our image of the world is built exclusively through the small broken mirror provided by them. Imagine a world without news. With no fact checking, no context, and no analysis. Imagine you had to learn about the new coronavirus epidemic only from Facebook and WhatsApp. A world in which we learn about the actions of the local mayor only through his press releases and Facebook live-s. It's not a pleasant scenario, but not that hard to imagine. We started to see it all around us.

What can we do? First of all, we can pay for information. Journalism is an expensive business. To do it well, besides salaries, you need funds for reporting, equipment, or training. Investigations are very expensive – those two, three pages we see in a paper, on a website, or in those 15 minutes on TV are oftentimes the result of months of reporting. But journalism doesn't just mean investigations; news is expensive too. You need a newsroom with journalists specialized in the fields they cover, who developed their expertise over time, who understand the complexities of the subjects they cover, who understand how institutions work, and who took the time to develop sources willing to speak to them. In order for all this useful information to exist in the first place and for it to reach us, we need to pay. Otherwise, the information will be paid by the authorities and the business sector. And our world will be decided exclusively by them.

We should also take a closer interest in the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) and the way this institution follows its obligations to the citizens and public interest. Without a functioning CNA, we'll see continuous violations of the law and the audiovisual code. CNA should become our project, as a society – to constantly put pressure on the institution to act on its mandate. To use the official online form for complaints, to participate in sessions, to write to its members and to our representatives in the Parliament. We don't need further regulation; the present ones can be efficient if we apply them. We don't need to close TV stations, we just need the CNA to do its job. And this is in our power.

It's vital that the public media institutions – TVR, Public radio, and Agerpres – become 'ours', as their name implies, and not just 'state media', as they are perceived by the politicians. The political pressure was strengthened with the elimination of the TV-radio tax. The tax was a mere 4 lei (~ 1 EUR) per month, and it offered not only financial independence, but also showed politicians and the management that the



public is the main investor in these institutions. Even without the tax, public media are fundamental to democracy. Financed with public money, through the state budget, they should only serve the public interest, without the need to 'earn a living', that forces commercial television into compromises. We, the citizens, are the shareholders they should answer to. With our backing, the journalists from public media would feel safer in doing their job.

With those important institutions – CNA and public media – slipping into irrelevancy, public interest became harder to defend. In the next few years, our society needs to act in this direction, of protecting our sources of information. As long as we consider that it's not our task to fight for our right to be informed with objectivity and professionalism, we'll just make it easier for those who don't want this to happen.

In any society, critical voices in the form of strong media products, that act as an honest mirror put in front of the authorities - and us -, are as important as an independent judiciary, or a functioning health system. The power of journalism is still there. If it weren't, the politicians would not spend so much effort trying to fight the media, buy it, or demonize it. Why is journalism still so strong? Because, as in the case of democracy, it's the best imperfect way of finding out about important things, in order to make the right decisions as a society.



### 3. The economic vulnerability: The old-school guys, the hyenas, and the new wave that's not coming

#### 3.1 The decapitalisation of the media

The newsrooms never recovered from the 2008-2009 economic crisis. Even if the ad market is growing, the money is still in short supply and goes predominantly to the national TV outlets. According to the Media Fact Book, the ad market was estimated in 2019 at 485 million euro, of which only 12 million were allocated to print (in comparison, in 2008 the print ad market was estimated at 82 million euro). The difference was split into 315 million for the TV market, 28 million for radio, 31 million for outdoor ads, and 99 million for online ads – out of which the biggest share went to big

*“It would be quite easy for me to retreat into investigations, into big media scoops, especially in this context, while the Colectiv documentary is running in the cinemas. People would love it: ‘Now this is media’ or ‘What a hit’. But it’s not true. The purpose of the media is to constantly watch over its beat, to dig into everyday news. We’re not a business of hits. We don’t score a big story, and then sit it out for five years. It doesn’t work like that. Investigations are not the (only) solution, because if you don’t have news, how can you have investigations?”*

Cătălin Tolontan, Libertatea

platforms, Google and Facebook. *“This is why journalists now have to go begging for ad money to various companies”,* says Brîndușa Armanca, senior editor at Revista 22 and professor at the Journalism Department of the Faculty of Social and Humanistic Sciences in Arad. *“This double professional nature - of journalist and salesman – doesn’t fit and is not recommendable. But this is happening frequently in the local media”,* says Armanca.

While print and digital are both struggling, the media companies that also own TV stations registered growing turnovers in 2018. As reported by Pagina de Media<sup>2</sup>, PRO TV SRL (the which owns PRO TV, PRO 2, PRO GOLD, PRO CINEMA, PRO X, PRO TV INTERNATIONAL, MTV, voyo.ro, protvplus.ro) had the largest profit – 55 million euros with a plus of almost 10 million from 2017. In second place is Antena Group (Antena 1, Antena Stars, Happy Channel, Antena Internațional, ZU TV, and several online outlets) with a profit of almost 13.5 million euros, more than double since 2017. Antena 3 TV station also reported a large profit growth in 2018, reaching 1.7 million in 2018 compared to approximately 330.000 euro in 2017. România TV station was also profitable in 2018 (350.000 euro) after a loss of almost 2 million euro in 2017. Both Prima TV and Realitatea TV continued to lose money in 2018.

Orlando Toader, editor-in-chief of NewsAr.ro in Arad, says that those who launch small news websites try to live on ads from private companies and thinks that, if the market was healthy and honest, without dark deals, private companies would allocate more for media ads. *“In that case, newspapers would automatically benefit from a stronger financial support. Otherwise, it’s very hard, especially in a city like Arad, where, if you’re not making yourself liked by the administration, the private sector avoids giving you money. They’re afraid to be seen supporting a paper that’s*

<sup>2</sup><https://www.paginademedia.ro/2019/06/cifre-de-afaceri-televiziuni-2018>

*critical towards the administration. We are lucky, for example we have contracts with ad agencies in Bucharest, as our main source of ad money, and that's how we manage to sustain ourselves,"* continues Orlando Toader.

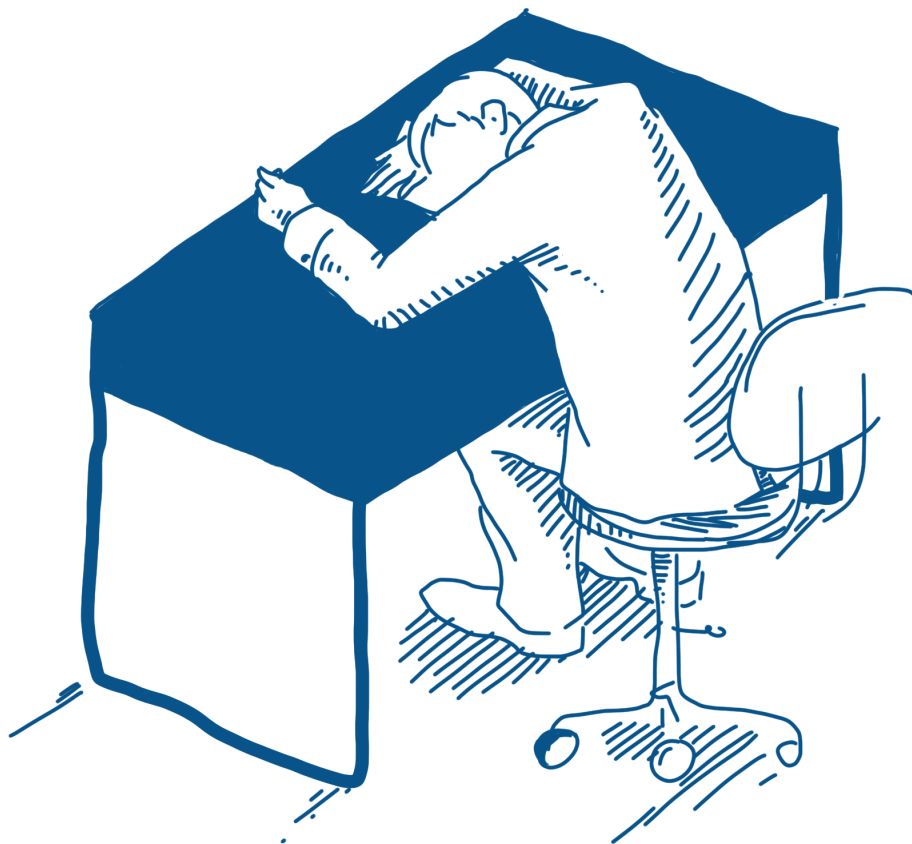
In Baia Mare, at least for the local TV stations, the ads from big, national sources are rare and come only when, for example, big retail chains open a new store in the region and order some advertorials. Mica Sváb, director of Tele+Marămureş station, says this lack of ad money at a national level is a major problem for them, because the money from local private advertisers are insufficient and those from the public sector sometimes come with political control. *"At the local level, those that advertise are companies with competitors, like a furniture shop or a rug shop. But compared to 10 years ago, when we had an avalanche of ads, we now have to argue extremely hard to convince them to advertise – and we have to lower our prices. They say that their advertising budget is the first to be cut while they struggle to pay their employees and pay all the taxes. More than that, my marketing colleague says that some of our clients mention that 'We'd rather go on Facebook, for free'. So even if we have an audience and we can prove that other clients say advertising with us works, many argue that 'Facebook is free'. Maybe you convince one out of ten that it's not the same thing, that people in the countryside or of a certain age are not on Facebook, so they're a missed group",* explains Sváb.

*"Journalism fails to do its public mission, which nobody else is doing. The moment you hope that the government or the city hall will keep you informed, you're lost. And then this whole caravan that we call democracy is broken, and the business sector will suffer severely."*

Codruţa Simina, PressOne

In the long term, this disconnect between the local media and the private sector will have a big cost: *"I think it's really bad that the people in the business community don't realize they will be the next ones to get hit after we're gone. Because we'll start to disappear, even us, those who still hang around today",* considers Codruţa Simina, journalist at PressOne in Cluj. *"Journalism fails to do its public mission, which nobody else is doing. The moment you hope that the government or the city hall will keep you informed, you're lost. And then this whole caravan that we call democracy is broken, and the business sector will suffer severely",* explains Simina.

This financial depletion of media companies brings another type of political dependence - to funds attributed by local public institutions. *"It's very efficient to buy journalists with ad contracts",* says Bogdan Marta, editor-in-chief of Timiş Online website in Timișoara. *"It all comes from the lack of money in the media industry. And these funds don't go to viable media products that really inform the people, they sustain propaganda."*



A fact that's confirmed by Cătălin Tolontan, editorial director at Ringier and journalist at Libertatea: *"The online market is very fragmented, there are hundreds of irrelevant websites, kept alive by the budgets of city halls or local businessmen. Any politician or businessman born in the world of politics can do this. If he has a 75.000 euro car and sells it three years later for 30.000 euro, he can use this money to keep a website for a year."*

Small towns like Botoșani or Arad have 20 or 30 media outlets. Cătălin Moraru, editor-in-chief of Monitorul de Botoșani newspaper, talks about this 'illusion of journalism': *"There are tons of publications, but they only publish press releases, or stories on car crashes. They lack any sort of content that comes from real reporting. This is very dangerous because it gives the public the illusion that it's informed. People consume what these 'media factories' produce and then come to us to say 'You're wrong. I read these other publications every day and they don't talk about it. Where did you come up with your story?'"*

Bogdan Marta adds that the companies that used to support newspapers now go to Google and Facebook because they say it's cheaper. *"We enter this drain and circle lower and lower, until the only thing that's left are these propaganda websites. Your only choice then will be which bubble you wanna live in,"* says Marta.

The competition with Facebook is also mentioned by Traian Deleanu, editor-in-chief of Turnul Sfatului online newspaper in Sibiu: *"It's even harder to fight with Facebook in online, because when you ask a client for 400 euro for a homepage banner, he's gonna laugh his head off. With 400 euro, he can really target his audience on Facebook."*

Cristian Pantazi, editor-in-chief of G4Media website, says that the economic uncertainty comes from various distortions of the online market. *"It's an unfair competition, with players that, besides the classical revenue of media (ads), top up their income with money that have no relation to their performance. I'm talking about money that comes from the sphere of politics. Usually, it's contracts signed with various state institutions. Especially under the PSD government, I saw players, usually the same ones, that benefited from extremely large sums offered by government institutions or local institutions – city halls or local state companies. And this really distorts the market."* To this problem, he adds the way in which the ad money is split, especially in online, where rebates (cuts and paybacks from the initial price offered by a media company) are very large: *"A big part of these funds do not reach the publishers, being lost in the food chain. You get to a situation where from 100 lei paid by the advertiser only 30 lei reach the publisher. The average is around 60%, but you can go to 70%. And this distorts all market research, made using the sums declared by the advertisers."*

*"The market considers only volume, whether we are talking about Google or the ad agencies. They only look for millions of views, without considering if there's an impact or not. It doesn't matter anymore in what medium you show your ad. This means a loss for everybody – not only publishers, but also for the clients, the agencies and their future."*

Problems caused by unfair competition are also seen in print. Anca Spânu, from *Viața Liberă* newspaper, explains: *“For example, Monitorul de Galați, our direct competitor, sells ads at a tenth of our price. Automatically, it’s going to win contracts by this criterion. We’re talking about the ‘dumping’ effect of the price, because they don’t live from this. When you have to live from ad money, you can’t go so low with the price, it’s impossible. It begs some questions: how do they cover their costs, how do they pay for printing?”*

These huge rebates are made worse by another problem mentioned by Răzvan Ionescu, publisher of Recorder: *“The market considers only volume, whether we are talking about Google or the ad agencies. They only look for millions of views, without considering if there’s an impact or not. It doesn’t matter anymore in what medium you show your ad. This means a loss for everybody – not only publishers, but also for the clients, the agencies and their future.”*

Cătălin Tolontan, editorial director Ringier Romania, considers that the business pushes journalism into a commodity: *“From the point of view of the audience (the number of people that click on your articles - calling them an audience is not always correct) it doesn’t matter if the newsroom has 5, 50 or 200 people. For the audience, all content is equal and this can act like a strong demotivator for the journalists.”*

In 2019, the successful business model we’ve all been waiting for has still not arrived. International examples show that every successful case has its own model, almost impossible to replicate on a large scale. In Romania, media outlets are torn between conserving the old business model - which, even if it doesn’t bring growth, can sometimes offer temporary survival - and testing individual solutions.

*“In order to survive, you have to constantly reinvent yourself,”* says photojournalist Octav Ganea, coordinator at Inquam Photos press agency. *“It’s hard, you need resources and time and, usually, those two are very rare in the media. But it’s not impossible,”* considers Ganea. *“We saw there are no more photo editors in our newsrooms. So you think about how you can help them, and, in the case of a major event or an upcoming event, you try to anticipate their needs. You know there’s a prime minister that is going to fall (e.n. Viorica Dăncilă), so you gather a set of neutral images and you sell them to newsrooms before or right after an event, so they don’t spend time searching for them. Because newsrooms don’t have enough people anymore, or they are busy translating from Google or out on reporting.”*

Cătălin Tolontan talks about the change process at Libertatea: *“It’s very difficult, because even we don’t know if it’s working or not. It works audience wise, yes. We have a larger audience now at Libertatea, between a quarter and a third. It also seems to work money wise. There’s a sort of acknowledgment on the part of some companies that are willing to pay for journalism that’s not a ‘commodity’, trying to help this kind of test. But honestly, I don’t know if it’s not too late. Because it’s not a replicable model. Is Recorder a replicable model? No. What are then other smaller models? I’m afraid for smaller models, for smaller newsrooms, I don’t think they can survive.”*

*“There’s a sort of acknowledgment on the part of some companies that are willing to pay for journalism that’s not a ‘commodity’, trying to help this kind of test. But honestly, I don’t know if it’s not too late.”*

Cătălin Tolontan, Libertatea

Traditional newsrooms became poorer in the last five years and more and more depopulated. Those who left either went into public administration or other more well-paid jobs, or they opened their own media organizations. The recipe can be simple and is found in almost every city: *“It’s much easier to make your own website and earn more money. You can build it with a tech-savvy friend, get some money from two or three politicians, and earn 1,000-1,500 euro a month, which is double or triple your old salary at a newspaper,”* explains Bogdan Marta, from Timiș Online. *“There are newsrooms with two or three people that try to do journalism, marketing, and sales, at the same time. There are also good journalists that do this, because they were fed up.”*

In Botoșani it’s the same, says Cătălin Moraru, editor-in-chief of Monitorul de Botoșani. *“This year we’re celebrating our 25th anniversary. There are also two or three other websites that publish good information. But the rest, more than 20, are one-man-newsrooms with a website where they copy from everybody and get enough ads to survive. Up to 70% of local media has nothing to do with media. This situation is general, not only here, in our county”,* explains Moraru.



Even in bigger cities, with a strong economy, like Cluj, media businesses are not very healthy. *“Newsrooms are extremely small and made up mainly from inexperienced journalists. It’s very sad when you think that Cluj is doing fine economically. This development should have been seen also in a better media”*, says Remus Florescu, journalist at Adevărul and president of the Professional Media Association in Cluj (APPC), one of the few associations for journalists that are still active. *“There are some reasons for this. One entrepreneur told me he bought some ads in a newspaper and the next day he was called by three other papers – ‘You have to give us too’. So he said to himself ‘Why bother?’”*, tells Florescu.

Classifieds, especially obituaries, used to be a big, steady source of income but their number dropped very low, even if they still keep alive some publications today. This kind of revenue is now taken away by free websites for classifieds and social media. *“We still have this section of obituaries, where relatives mourn the loss of a family member, but I’m starting to see them more and more on Facebook now. Slowly, they’re moving there also”*, says Dragoș Bako, editor-in-chief of Tribuna newspaper in Sibiu.

Local publications that still come out in print are also facing the problem of distribution, with many *‘horror stories’* involving the Romanian Post (Poșta Română). Jurnal Arădean, the largest local newspaper in the country, has around 9,000 subscriptions. Newsstand sales are very low, because they’re only using 6 or 7 stands in Arad and can’t find street sellers. *“At one point, I was also in charge of the distribution department for a year and a half. I found it an impossible task. You work with your people and with the Romanian Post and I don’t know which one is harder. It used to be impossible to work with the Romanian Post. There were mailmen who only delivered the newspaper once a week, all at once. We also have our own distributors, part-time, for two hours a day, but the taxes on salaries that we have to pay now are killing us,”* explains Adriana Barbu, editor-in-chief of Jurnal Arădean newspaper and Arad Online website. *“Initially, a lot of money used to come from print and very little from online. We tried to balance it, I think we’re now at 60-40, but the price value of an ad is still higher in print.”*

*“We had a lady who bought a four month subscription but the Post didn’t start to deliver her paper. And you really can’t do anything about it.”*

Anca Spânu, Viața Liberă

The distribution problems were mentioned by all managers and print journalists that we've talked to. Because of unreliable distribution, some subscribers give up on buying the paper, usually people from rural areas and villages, that are not big internet consumers, so they're left with no alternative source of information to TV. Anca Spânu talks about the situation in Galați: *"The Romanian Post does whatever it wants. We had a lady who bought a four month subscription but the Post didn't start to deliver her paper. And you really can't do anything about it. You have a contract, you gave the papers, the Post took them, so the reader should go against it, but it turns against you and not subscribe anymore."*

Cătălin Tolontan thinks the fight for print is already lost. *"We'll be the first country in the European Union with no significant print publications. We'll still have some magazines, maybe one or two small newspapers, but I think in two or three years we'll not have print media anymore. It seems like a lost cause to me, with the distribution and print in this form."*

Local radio stations are insignificant players, with huge financial problems, mostly because of copyright taxes for the music. *"There are a lot of collective societies that keep asking for money and, even though radio should be a profitable medium, we can't reach that level,"* says Moraru.

Constantin Trofin, lector at the journalism department of Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj, considers that a true media institution cannot exist without private backing, from businessmen who understand that an objective media is good for society as a whole, including their companies. Codruța Simina says that, when it comes to the business of media, *"the fundamental problem is that we have some investors willing to invest in media, but their understanding of the way media works is very limited. You can't expect results from a media project in only six months. By committing only for such short periods, they waste the efforts of so many people in the newsroom."*

Traian Deleanu, from Turnul Sfatului, also says media investments involve long-term commitment: *“After three publications from where I left because I couldn’t resist the pressure of the owners, we said let’s try our own. After 9 years, last year was our first when the income from ads covered our expenses.”* The team from Turnul Sfatului decided to open a parallel business for outdoor banners, which supported their publication, and also won three projects with European funding that helped pay some salaries. *“We managed to diversify our streams of revenue, especially with this outdoor ads business, so the money we’re losing if somebody gets upset about what we write are not vital to us. People swear at us that we’re ‘city hall’s newspaper’, because we have a contract with them to publish their press releases. But if you read this week’s op-ed, we criticized the mayor because he inaugurated a mall without a fire security authorisation. How can you cut a ribbon on this? How can you warrant such a thing?”* argues Deleanu. Mica Sváb, director of TL + Maramureş station in Baia Mare, would also want to attract European funding, but says *“it’s extremely hard to attract projects, or almost impossible, because there’s not much financing going towards this media sector.”*

*“People swear at us that we’re ‘city hall’s newspaper’, because we have a contract with them to publish their press releases. But if you read this week’s Op ed, we criticized the mayor because he inaugurated a mall without a fire security authorisation. How can you cut a ribbon on this?”*

Traian Deleanu, Turnul Sfatului

Andreea Pavel, director of Info Sud-Est website in Constanța, talks about the anxiety and burnout associated with taking on the role of a media manager. *“I love my job and end up working 14-16 hours a day - if it’s journalism work, I do it with pleasure. But here comes this problem of the double roles: I’m also the one who has to manage the expenses, bills and administrative work. And this work drains you. My anxiety and burnout don’t come from the journalistic work, but from the administrative stuff that you have to do first in order to then do your reporting. It’s a vicious cycle. We should get some people to do this for us, but we don’t have the money. In order to have the money for this, you need to make some compromises.”*

Răzvan Ionescu thinks that one of the biggest problems of the Romanian media is the absence of publishers that have an understanding of the media business today, with data and market studies, who can also do sales and diversify the streams of income. *“We don’t have a school for publishers. It’s not something that sticks out, like the problem with distribution, but the publishers are very few, because we don’t have a school where people can learn to run their media business.”*

The lack of knowledge and experience with marketing and sales is also mentioned by Cristian Pantazi: *“It’s clear with us (G4Media), because we’re all journalists here. And it’s a general problem.”*

Vlad Stoicescu, journalist at Dela0.ro, shares this view: *“Most journalists, us included, don’t know how to sell - so we need people that can do media management, which is different from bakery management. There are some economic mechanisms shared by any type of business, but the media offers you a very small margin in which you can mess up your product. If you fail to make good bread for a couple of days, you can still keep your customers. Media is different and those two days when you messed up are going to stick with you. Your customers are going to leave, and you’re left with people that never really bought your product or with people attracted to the bad parts of it. You can say that cable news stations make a lot of bad products – but nobody is actually buying their TV content. Many watch Romania TV, but nobody buys content. It’s paid by the ads run in hope that those old people will buy their drugs or whatever they’re promoting; or by the politicians that think they’re getting influence. In this case, it’s actually us who are paying, because it’s public money. The final consumer doesn’t buy, he only pays for the cable, which is cheap – for 30-35 lei a month he gets 150 channels.”*

Alice Iacobescu, the next5 editor-in-chief of Europa FM, with an eight years experience as an anchor for Digi24 TV station, says that it’s not only a simple problem of lack of expertise, but that good media managers took refuge in other industries. According to Iacobescu, good managers left as they were not tolerated, because their ethical code and integrity didn’t match the owners’ agendas.

Political control, doubled by bad management and decreasing income, explains the current media landscape. *“The last 10-15 years show that even where there were financial resources things eventually turned out to be disastrous editorially, and then financially, because these two depend on each other. If you don’t have a product, what are you selling?”* asks Vlad Stoicescu. *“We saw this with Evenimentul Zilei, a paper owned by a foreign company in 2008, when I first got there. It used to pay for almost any editorial proposal we had. If you stop feeding the editorial product, you can lose the business at any time, no matter your ideas on various combinations with politicians or how to get ads (not because your product has any value, but because of dark deals that may end sooner or later). You end up competing with others that do it cheaper or faster than you. When you decide to adopt unethical practices, others will take it one step further. If you sell yourself cheap, at one point others will do it for free,”* explains Stoicescu.

*“The decisions are now instinctively about survival,” says Toni Hrițac, editor-in-chief at Ziarul de Iași. “Each one of us survives by looking at what’s essential for him, and trying to conserve that part. If sales are essential to me, I’m concentrating my efforts on sales. Everybody did this. ‘Let’s limit my losses on the print edition or sell more.’ Then, when they saw they couldn’t stop this loss, they focused on subscriptions. ‘Let’s increase my number of subscriptions.’ When they saw they couldn’t raise them forever, they said ‘Let me at least conserve my income from ads.’ It was always a game of conserving income or limiting losses. They never thought about the possibilities of growing. In honesty, those possibilities are small. You have to understand the market and to start, first of all, to educate your ad clients – those are essential.”*

Costin Ionescu, from Edupedu.ro (former media journalist at Hotnews.ro), thinks that management strategies are all over the spectrum. *“There are some who innovate constantly, because they can’t stand still, and adapt fast. Others don’t move at all, don’t try anything, and they’re going to lose.”*



The public is still unwilling to pay for content, for various reasons. Many say that media companies are already getting money from ads. Others complain about the quality of the journalistic product. This lack of income from the audience pushes the media into dependency on local political and business interests, with an arbitrary financing model, so the public interest is left unaddressed. There is a small growth in Bucharest, where media startups are attracting more donations from the public since 2016. The most successful case is that of Inclusiv, a new publication started by a small team with some of the best known journalists in Romania, who managed to raise 100,000 euro from 1,600 people, even before launch. The Inclusiv campaign showed that you can rally support for a media product if you manage to bring together a set of important elements: award winning journalists, a campaign that's visible and strong, and a clear message. In the short and medium term, the success of this project could stimulate the involvement of the public – or its failure can slow it.

Victor Ilie, one of the founders, talks about the enormous pressure and responsibility that comes with being credited with so much trust, but also about the professional challenges when you start a new media project from scratch: *“Personal ego can be a problem, because I got used to the hundreds of thousands of readers at RISE Project and now I’m back to just thousands and it’s hard. I’m the same person, I’m doing the same things, but reach fewer readers now. Still, they are more engaged.”*

The Inclusiv model, no matter how remarkable it was in terms of crowdfunding, cannot be easily replicated. The new media startups are still underfinanced and need a supporting audience in order to serve their mission, same as the mainstream ones. In this report, we tried to avoid the term independent journalism, associated only with this kind of media products, because independent journalists and independent journalism are those that serve the public interest, and they can also be seen in mainstream media, in legacy publications, even if they're not as visible or promoted.

DOR (Decât o Revistă), a magazine dedicated to narrative journalism and which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2019, combines its print edition with special events and conferences, it funds projects from donors in order to report on certain subjects, and tries various kinds of media innovations. Even so, DOR hit a rough patch at the end of 2018 and Cristian Lupşa was one of the first media managers to speak publicly about their financial problems, asking for the support of the readers. At that moment, the public responded by buying subscriptions and products from the magazine's online shop.

The most successful media project of the last two or three years is Recorder. The publication focuses on video content and, starting in February 2020, podcasts. Their business model is a mix of sponsored content, as a main source of income, and donations from their audience and grants from institutional donors. Without those kinds of grants, products like the recent documentary “30 Years of Democracy”, one of the most viral productions of 2019 (with approximately 1.2 million views as of February 2020) would not have been possible due to huge production costs – just the archive footage reportedly cost them 35.000 euro.

*“We reached sales of 100,000 lei in the last two months, from November 1st to the end of December. By comparison, between September 1st and October 30th we only had sales of 25,000 lei,”* told Cristian Lupşa in an interview for Pagina de Media from February 2019<sup>3</sup>.

Cătălin Tolontan, himself a donor for several media startups, considers that this crowdfunding model, where you ask readers to donate, is not a failproof solution, because it not only leads to communities, but also to editorial bubbles. *“There’s a fear in writing, in being critical, in upsetting your public, so you may prefer to stay in an anti-PSD bubble, for example, rather than write critically about PNL, because the next day half your donors cancel their donations.”* The case of RISE Project is the clearest example of this scenario. After a series of articles on Dan Barna, the leader of USR party and a presidential candidate at that point, part of the RISE Project donors cancelled their subscriptions.

*“The question is... would this audience pay for a good product? We don’t have an answer to this question, at least at the local level.”*

Vlad Stoicescu, Dela0

In local media, donation based financial contributions, different than buying the paper, are non-existent. *“The question is... would this audience pay for a good product? We don’t have an answer to this question, at least at the local level. It’s easy for me, in Bucharest, to answer this, because I can have an audience here. But a local paper, even if it offers the best kind of journalism, could end up dying in glory. Honestly, I don’t think people would hurry to buy that product,”* considers Vlad Stoicescu.

The experience of some of the local publishers says that, in most cases, the answer is no. *“We get tips from the public but sometimes we can’t follow through, because we don’t have the time. And then the reaction is ‘If you don’t want to write about it, I’ll send it to RISE Project’. But I can’t be RISE Project, which annoys me, because that publication comes out with an article once every few months but I have to publish every day. Sometimes I do manage to go in depth with my reporting, but you, the reader, come to me and say ‘Look, I’m donating to them, but not to you,’”* says Traian Deleanu. His team at Turnul Sfatului also wants to test a donating feature on their website, but they’re doubtful it’s gonna work, for the same reasons mentioned by Cătălin Tolontan – ideological bubbles and the radicalization of the public. *“By trying to be impartial, you end up upsetting your audience, especially now when*

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.paginademedi.ro/2019/02/facem-romania-bine-decat-o-revista-cristi-lupsa>



*people seem to have fallen into political madness,” says Deleanu. “Here, in Sibiu, we have a big problem that we’re still writing about PSD, after the change of the government. We try to explain that they’re still a party present in Parliament, that they are still involved in decisions. And when we took political advertisements from them during the campaign, it was a slaughter.”*

The same backlash was reported by all the publications seen as “in opposition”, the moment they ran electoral ads from PSD. *“The public is very quick to brand you,”* says Adriana Barbu, from Arad. *“Now, during the campaign, we have electoral ads, and they are signalled properly with a capital P (from Publicity) and a clear message of ‘This is an ad ordered by X, on the contract Y’. But still, people swear at us and call us the lowest kind of journalists. We never saw this level of hate before. It happens especially on Facebook. I’ve tried to explain in my replies to the emails I get that ads are the ones that pay for salaries and other expenses. You have to take time and answer people and explain yourself. I think this is one of our main problems, that we don’t have time anymore to listen to people and answer them.”*

Cătălin Moraru also mentions this radicalization of the public. *“Because of our lack of media literacy and because finding the ‘truth’ is so tiring, people end up consuming only the media that says what they want to hear. This huge faultline in our society contributed to this, besides the lack of good journalistic practices. I’ve never seen, in my 30 years as a journalist, this kind of situation where people stop buying a paper because they don’t like what it’s saying, especially at the local level. In the last three years, we had to adopt a sort of ‘cold’ reporting, especially in print, on issues of governing or economy, so not to lose readers who buy the paper. It’s a matter of money. We write about everything, but with less engaging headlines, even if the text is the same. We practically have two papers, one in print and one online.”*

### 3.1.1 Hungarian language media

The radicalization of the public can also be seen in the Hungarian language media. With a circulation of approximately 8,900 copies, Bihari Napló, a daily paper from Oradea, is the second largest newspaper in Romania after Jurnal Arădean, with 9,600 copies. In comparison, Adevărul sells under 8,000 copies nationally and Evenimentul Zilei closed its print edition. The Hungarian language media depends on governmental sources of income, either from Romania or from Hungary. And the public is becoming more and more segregated. *“You have this parallel community, because the vast majority of the Hungarians in Romania are facing towards Hungary and consume mainly, or only, media products from Hungary or in Hungarian,”* tells Szász Attila, editor-in-chief of the Hungarian language department at Radio Târgu Mureș. *“The percentage of those who read a Romanian newspaper, listen to a Romanian radio, or watch a Romanian TV station is getting lower and lower, towards zero,”* says Szász. According to him, one of the main reasons is that the Romanian media doesn't talk about them.

*“If a citizen from Harghita or Covasna, counties with a large Hungarian minority, watches the Romanian TV stations, he doesn't see himself in their programming, not even in the regional outlets. Harghita and Covasna only make the news when there are problems with flags, cemeteries, or bears.”*

Szász Attila, Radio Târgu Mureș

According to PressOne, the main channel through which the authorities in Budapest fund the Hungarian language media in Romania is the Association for Transylvanian Media Space – ASMT (Erdélyi Médiatér Egyesület), registered in 2013 in Salard village, Bihor county. *“In a project submitted to the Human Resources Ministry in Hungary, the Hungarian government decided to finance ASMT with 1.9 billion forints, meaning approximately 6 million euro. The money was allocated in March 2019 and comes after a previous instalment of 1.45 billion forints (4.5 million euro) back in 2017,”* writes PressOne<sup>4</sup>.

One of the cases that showed Budapest's level of influence on the public agenda of the Hungarian community in Romania is the Ditrău scandal. The owner of a bakery in the village of Ditrău hired two workers from Sri Lanka, igniting a storm of

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<sup>4</sup>[https://pressone.ro/presa-de-limba-maghiara-din-transilvania-este-preluata-de-fidesz?fbclid=IwAR10i5yqlyDuL5TvZU95xF5gyMfEo\\_a7s9fnjgzOCHYCjmLKo6U7buXiUN8](https://pressone.ro/presa-de-limba-maghiara-din-transilvania-este-preluata-de-fidesz?fbclid=IwAR10i5yqlyDuL5TvZU95xF5gyMfEo_a7s9fnjgzOCHYCjmLKo6U7buXiUN8)

xenophobic protests from the local community, which demanded an 'immigrant free village'<sup>5</sup>. Several influential voices in the Hungarian community, like Markó Béla, former president of UDMR party, Péter Eckstein Kovács, and Csaba Asztalos, president of the National Council against Discrimination (CNCD), condemned the locals' reaction and pointed to the danger of radicalization in the Hungarian minority. In an interview for Digi24, Csaba Asztalos stated that: "The Hungarian community in Transylvania is connected to the regional mass-media through our connection to Hungary, where we know very well that the anti-immigration speech is a constant element of public communication. As such, maybe the source of the fears in Ditrău, and not only there, can be explained this way<sup>6</sup>." Péter Eckstein Kovács was also quoted by Deutsche Welle saying that "the incidents are clearly xenophobic in nature and can be linked, without a doubt, to the influence of Hungarian mass-media in Transylvania<sup>7</sup>." In this case, the discussion about the work exploitation mentioned by the locals did not get the attention of the Romanian language media. Hungarian language media also focused initially on the accusations of racism, which were replaced subsequently by the social subject of the mistreatment of workers by business owners in the Szekler area. The change of editorial focus was made in good faith, argues Szász Attila, which also mentions the notable exception of Átlátszó Erdély, an investigative journalism project from Cluj, which balanced the two themes, also publishing an article in Romanian<sup>8</sup>.

Szász Attila says the public radio is in a better spot, because it is perceived as the radio of the community. *"We have almost 200,000 daily listeners, we're the most listened to radio outside Hungary, covering four counties with a Hungarian population of 600,000."* He argues that the statute of public radio offers them some independence from the politics set by Viktor Orbán's government in Budapest. Even so, Szász says that he can see the change in editorial expectations on the part of his listeners, that he notices various issues becoming political, with an emotional nationalism string. *"Until now, the Hungarians in Transylvania had a special identity, they kept a distance from the politics in Hungary, but this line is starting to fade. Many of them are Fidesz voters, having double citizenship."*

<sup>5</sup><https://www.g4media.ro/radicalizare-anti-migranti-a-cetatenilor-din-satul-harghitean-ditrau-in-frunte-cu-preotul-catolic-primarul-da-vina-pe-mass-media-iar-proprietarii-caselor-in-care-stau-muncitorii-din-sri-lanka-au-fo.html>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.g4media.ro/csaba-asztalos-presedintele-cncd-despre-scandalul-xenofob-din-ditrau-incidentarea-la-ura-atrage-raspunderea-juridica-comunitatea-maghiara-din-transilvania-este-conectata-la-mass-media-regionala-si-di.html>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.dw.com/en/viktor-orbans-dangerous-export-of-ideologies/a-52246500>

<sup>8</sup><https://atlatszo.ro/ro/romana/furia-anti-imigranti-de-la-ditrau-se-pleaza-pestel-mai-clasic-tip-de-exploatare-reportaj-video>

The authorities in Budapest are not the only ones responsible for this radicalization of the Hungarian audience, but also the ones in Bucharest, which abandoned a large part of their citizens to outside influence, thinking that the few dedicated programs on the public TV and radio stations can do the job of informing the citizens in these communities. Ligia Voro, a journalist from Târgu Mureș, speaks about the division between the two ethnic communities and the lack of common projects. On the medium term, the Ditrău case can be just the beginning of ethnic conflicts, spawned not necessarily from hatred towards their neighbours, but by the sentiment of abandonment felt in these isolated communities – fertile grounds for nationalistic messages.

### 3.1.2 Public service media

Public service media became almost a marginal subject and the people interviewed for this report constantly pointed out that these institutions fail in their mandate. Political control over the two institutions is maintained by appointing and dismissing their Administrative Council on a strictly political basis. The council can be dismissed if its annual report is rejected in Parliament and, in almost 30 years, only four councils finished their 4 year mandate.

This control is felt even more strongly after the elimination, in February 2017, of the TV and radio tax, which left the two institutions entirely dependent on state funding. In 2018 and 2019, the TVR budget from public funds was approximately 400 million lei (around 83 million euro) and that of the public radio of 380 million lei (almost 79 million euro). The public radio journalists interviewed for this report told us that, at least at a regional level, the situation is more relaxed there, even though they can feel the intrusion of the political sphere. *“Until the fall of the government, the radio was subordinated to that government, let’s admit it. After the TV-radio tax disappeared, the radio became a state structure, even if we like it or not. We, here, don’t feel that much political pressure. You can’t be very critical, but you have to say what’s happening. It’s the same with PSD as with the other parties. Our materials can be published with no problems if they’re dry in tone, with no commentary,”* says one of the correspondents for Radio România.

Vasile Hotea-Fernezan, from Cluj, says that, *“in TVR, you have the freedom you’re willing to take. If you’re doing something and doing it well, it’s hard for somebody to stop you. They may try, but legally they can’t do much.”* But the pressure is there: *“Our boss, Doina Gradea, said in some recorded discussions, published by Dragoş Pătraru, that the journalists from the news department are ‘haters’, always criticizing their subjects, because they asked mayor Gabriela Firea some questions, instead of just praising her. My belief is that a journalist is closer to a ‘hater’ than to a groupie for institutions, especially political institutions. When you have this kind of people running and setting the tone for entire media institutions, you realize it can’t really work<sup>9</sup>. Fortunately, my colleagues in the news desk are still ‘haters’.”*

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<sup>9</sup> <https://patraru.ro/2018/05/03/un-mesaj-de-ziua-libertatii-de-exprimare-jos-labele-de-pe-tvr/>

In May 2018, Dragoș Pătraru, who was producing at that point the Starea Nației show at TVR, published recordings of Doinea Gradea, President Director General (PDG) of TVR, regarding one of the journalists in the news department: *“I won’t even mention the budget, because TVR will have the biggest budget ever. They could have chosen not to give us money. And you find some idiot involving the institution in scandal. They did it non-stop. When PNL was in power, they took on them. When it was the PD, they took on the PD. Now it’s them, PSD, and they take on them too. They have like some sort of hatred. Coming out like trolls. Professional haters. They are not against a party, they are just professionally ‘against’.* After the mediatization of these recordings, several TVR employees reacted publicly<sup>10</sup>.”

At the end of 2018, when Libertatea published information on the salaries of some of the TVR employees, Doina Gradea demanded publicly that those journalists reveal their sources, threatening Libertatea with a lawsuit<sup>11</sup>. The protection of the sources is one of the fundamental principles of journalism and this request further demonstrates a profound contempt on the part of the PDG for the journalistic values. The article published by Libertatea showed that one of TVR’s show presenter was paid 25,000 lei a month, while the average salary for the rest of the news department of TVR was not much higher than the market average.

At the end of January 2020, journalist Costin Ionescu published an analysis of the report done by the Court of Auditors on expenses in public media in 2018<sup>12</sup>. The biggest irregularities were in the salaries paid to general directors, higher than what’s allowed by law, in public acquisitions, and ineligible expenditures.

*“I won’t say they should be closed, because it would violate their main principle. I do believe public service media have their purpose, but I don’t believe in them anymore as they are now,”* says Cătălin Tolontan, adding that he doesn’t even see intermediary solutions for public media. *“I don’t see grey anymore. It’s black now, with this absolutely irresponsible and toxic management, which spends a billion euro every five years.”* One solution, in his view, is merging the two institutions and *“changing some parts of their functioning law, which is not all bad. The problem is that they strayed far from the law, not that the law is bad.”* Tolontan also thinks that part of the solution should be a return to the money *“paid directly by the people”*.

Reinstating the TV-radio tax is a difficult project, in the context of this almost complete lack of trust in the two institutions, but it may be a first step into reminding people of the public interest mandate at the core of a public television and radio.

<sup>10</sup><https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/diverse/scrisoare-deschisa-jurnalisti-tvr-indignati-de-limbajul-doinei-gradea-923016>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/tvr-cheltuit-pesto-1-milion-de-euro-pe-recitalurile-de-la-cerbul-de-aur-doar-nicole-scherzinger-ex-pussycat-dolls-luat-aproape-jumatate-din-suma-2467643>

<sup>12</sup>[https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media\\_publicitate-23630120-curtea-conturi-prea-multi-bani-pentru-sefii-radioului-televizunii-publice-probleme-confirmate-cerbul-aur-nereguli-fiscale-a-gerpres.htm](https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-23630120-curtea-conturi-prea-multi-bani-pentru-sefii-radioului-televizunii-publice-probleme-confirmate-cerbul-aur-nereguli-fiscale-a-gerpres.htm)

### 3.1.3 The media in the electoral campaign

In 2019, there were two rounds of electoral campaigns, one for European Parliament elections, the other a presidential election. If in the past, campaigns were a source of scandal and conflict, but also of higher income for mass-media, 2019 was a quiet year. *“These campaigns were child’s play. We didn’t even feel them, not even the European Parliament elections. The campaign was felt on Facebook but rather through messages of ‘go out and vote’. Usually, the campaigns are craziest at the local level, when you have to support a certain candidate or party. But the stake wasn’t big enough for the presidential elections. In the case of the European Parliament elections, everybody knew it was actually a vote on Liviu Dragnea. If the result was different, it’s clear it could not have been possible what happened to him after that,”* believes one local journalist.

In most cases, the electoral ads were contracted based on political ‘sympathies’ and candidates preferred social media as their main communication channel. *“The campaign brought some money, but not much. Only two candidates came to us. And we saw this ‘political sympathy’ criterion in the case of the other publications. In Arad, where the authorities are dominated by PNL, the media ‘subscribed’ to public funds get most of their ads from PNL, and not from USR or PSD. We, the three-four publications here that try to keep an independence from the local administration, received ads from PSD and USR, but not from PNL,”* says Orlando Toader, NewsAr.ro in Arad. Journalist Bogdan Marta (Timiș Online) doesn’t handle the ad sales, but he also knows that the candidates in the EU elections preferred social media – *“Out of 14 candidates, only three contacted us.”*

Anca Spânu talks about how politicians themselves are disrespecting the law. *“If you publish an electoral ad, it must state the source of the financing, the contract number, it must be marked as such, with ‘P’ from publicity, and it must not contain offensive language and personal attacks. Most of the time, the political adversaries attack themselves so hard, we have to intervene and send them back the texts for a rewrite.”*

Asked how the EU electoral campaign was felt in their city, one editor-in-chief said that: *“Not how we expected it. It was the first campaign in which the parties preferred not to sign ad contracts with us, because they said they don’t have a budget, that they can’t afford it. But then I saw them on TV and in other publications. We have this clear rule: nothing goes in without a contract and a bill paid upfront, because we had situations where it took us two years to see the money.”*

## 3.2 Salaries - A balancing act on the poverty line

### 3.2.1 Those who stay

*“When you’re a journalist and don’t see a future in your profession, you don’t take risks. Then, people retreat into reportage and slowly dilute the most important base of journalism, the critical instinct, the role of a true watchdog. Journalism is not seen anymore as a respectable profession or as a job with a future – you may believe that in five years’ time this profession will be gone. And then you use it as a springboard for something else, while it still can be used as a springboard,”* says Toni Hrițac, editor-in-chief of Ziarul de Iași.

Salaries are still very low, even if, compared to a few years ago, they are paid in time. At the local level, a journalist may earn between 1,200 and 2,500 lei after taxes, in rare cases reaching 3,000 lei. In Bucharest, salaries for reporters can get a little higher, but still do not offer a decent living. *“Journalists are very poorly paid, so it’s hard to do quality journalism, because you always fight the thought that you may not have enough money to get by ‘till the end of the month,”* says Adriana Barbu. *“So you don’t have the same enthusiasm, the same energy. You’re paid poorly and you live poorly. Because the money is scarce, the journalists are scarce too, so you end up doing a lot of different things. You can’t specialize in a certain domain where you can feel you really have a handle on things, so you may end up making mistakes, being unsure of yourself - and this is what journalism should be about, a strong confidence in what you deliver to your public,”* explains Barbu.

Most of those who stayed in this profession did so out of passion. *“You stay because you’re passionate about it, because there is still this illusion of power, that you matter,”* says Ichim Vasiliță, from Crișana paper in Oradea. *“Because this is what it’s all about – that even if you take the tram and afford just instant soup, you matter in this equation, that very important people are ‘under your pen’. It’s an illusion which keeps this profession going further. Those that don’t think like this find something better.”*

*“Journalism is not seen anymore as a respectable profession or as a job with a future – you may believe that in five years’ time this profession will be gone.”*

Toni Hrițac, Ziarul de Iași

*“You stay because you’re passionate about it, because there is still this illusion of power, that you matter.”*

Ichim Vasiliță, Crișana



The problems stem not only from low salaries, but also from poor working conditions. *“In certain newsrooms I’ve worked in, there was little investment in the people out in the field, the reporters were paid miserably, they had to work with old equipment, patched beyond its life cycle, and there was no question of trainings,”* tells Cristina Oprea, a journalist from Craiova and local correspondent for central TV stations. *“Basically, if you’re not crazy about this profession, there’s no reason for you to leave your house.”* She also mentions a phenomenon that empties the newsrooms – the migration to other professions. *“If in our newsroom people can work in shifts, with a relatively predictable work schedule, and can share or help each other in reporting bigger stories, in the case of the correspondents there’s an overstretching of the teams, working in alert mode, 24/7. You get to mental and physical exhaustion and in the long term it results in a migration of journalists to other domains or, worse, to jobs where they have the job of dressing up bad things or keeping them quiet – spokesperson for public institutions,”* explains Oprea.

Remus Florescu describes the situation in Cluj: *“The starting salary is around 1,500 lei. Mathematically, you can’t live on this money in Cluj. In the case of an experienced journalist, the average salary for a reporter is around 2,500 lei. A restaurant owner in Cluj told me he couldn’t find a dishwasher for 2,100 lei. So a dishwasher earns more than a journalist with three years of college, with a lot of investment in this job, and facing a hostile work environment.”* As such, there’s no wonder why the desire to enter this profession is fading more and more.

Media institutions with certain political agendas are able to offer bigger salaries, but most of those that live on ads or donations from their audience are limited by lack of funds. *“No editor in his right mind would decide not to invest in his human resource, if he would have the money, in order to make his own life easier. These are interconnected and we stretch as much as the blanket allows us, and this is true for most publishers I know,”* says Cristian Pantazi (G4Media).

The depopulation of the newsrooms is so serious that, at the local level, publications are left with an average of one to five people, which have to report on City Hall, police, cultural events, etc. Editorial beats and expertise have completely disappeared. Codruța Simina, from PressOne, synthesizes the problem: *“The almost-complete disappearance of local media hits us all in a very serious way. I’ve worked for 12 years writing on the administration in local publications. At this moment, in Cluj, there’s not a single publication left to cover this basic task, to write about the decisions of the Local Council or the County Council. They’re gone. Newsrooms are horribly understaffed. And their source of income are local state companies, public institutions, or big private companies that sometimes realize they need somebody to publish their press releases. This tragic disappearance of local media is terrifying.”*

Even in newsrooms where there's still a formal separation between big editorial beats, journalists cover multiple domains and report on various subjects. *"The fact that we are so few people in the newsroom leads to a different prioritization of the work we do, in the sense that you don't have time to be a journalist, you have to be an editor of press releases. The institutions are flooding us with press releases now, and even if I say they're irrelevant, my boss will reply 'Look, it's in other publications, why haven't we published anything?' If I spend my time on this, what kind of journalist am I? I'm just an editor of press releases,"* confessed one local journalist.

Another problem is that this apparent diversity of media outlets actually hides a narrowing of reporting assets: *"We got to a point where there's only one cameraman shooting for six national TV stations. What kind of competition is there where you have the same footage, the only difference being the spin on the story, different from outlet to outlet? The reporters are talking to each other trying not to match their text too closely..."* says one of the editors we spoke to.

Most times, those who leave are senior reporters, with significant experience and expertise, good journalists that are hard to replace – and this shows in the quality of the content, leading to further loss of readers, in a negative feedback loop. *"Somehow, it may look as if the media is doing fine and even excels when it comes to fast reactions, in immediate reporting of an event – but even there the content is actually shallow and in a strong competition with social networks,"* argues Toni Hrițac (Ziarul de Iași). *"It's relatively easy to write about an accident, or something like this. In order to survive, the media has to cover things more deeply, in articles where you absolutely need the skill of a journalist. You need this even to cover a current event, let alone investigations or analyses,"* says Hrițac. *"Many local publications can't afford to maintain a minimal team even for the main events and beats. Not to mention emerging editorial niches, like the IT industry that we have in Iași. There are 20,000 people working in IT in Iași and I don't have somebody to cover it. It's very hard for me to train a man to write confidently about this, to go talk to them about networks, AI, or how their machines work."*

Alice Iacobescu (Europa FM) also talks about this vicious circle as a mix of problems tightly connected. *"I don't know what acts as a cause and which as the effect, everything is connected. We have a lack of support for journalists, generating an unhealthy work environment many choose to leave. As such, we end up relying on journalists without experience or knowledge, who had no possibility to develop. A vicious cycle again."*



### 3.2.2 Copy/paste media - or when journalists don't respect their mandate

In CJI's state of media report from 2016, 'fear' was the term dominating the conversations. In 2019, 'doubt' infiltrated the newsrooms. *"Is it worth it? Why bother? So this is what I'm struggling for? It doesn't bring me any benefits – no prestige, no professional satisfaction, no money. Instead, I have only drawbacks."* These are thoughts and comments repeated by journalists from all over the country.

*"We lost our expertise and standards"* was mentioned, again and again, by those we talked to. But what does it mean? From the lack of specialization to an absence of equidistance; from the publishing of press releases in a copy/paste fashion to people without experience that don't know what to ask when they go out in the field, because no one taught them.

*"Ofcourse I can understand that, when democracy is truly in danger or its foundations are being eroded, you can think, as a journalist and as a human, that you must act as one from 'the good side of the force', but this is like Socrates' reasoning that, when he gives up on something little, then he would break another principle, then another, until nobody would respect the laws and everything crumbles."*

Vasile Hotea-Fernezan,  
TVR Cluj

*"It seems to me that, in television for example, journalists are placing themselves on one side or another of the political spectrum and even if I can empathise with those that are 'on the good side of the force', I still think journalism is losing something important, some of the principles we should not abdicate from,"* says Vasile Hotea-Fernezan, from TVR Cluj. *"When I say principles, I mean objectivity and measure. Of course I can understand that, when democracy is truly in danger or its foundations are being eroded, you can think, as a journalist and as a human, that you must act as one from 'the good side of the force', but this is like Socrates' reasoning that, when he gives up on something little, then he would break another principle, then another, until nobody would respect the laws and everything crumbles."*

Some journalists are caught between their desire to do their job and the need to keep afloat the institutions they work for, a fight between professional pride and burnout. *"By lowering the quality and the number of journalists, we end up publishing a non-stop news feed, but with no relevant information, the kind of deep, complex information that's harder to produce,"* says Adriana Barbu. *"We still do investigations, but we don't dig as deep as we'd like in the bowels of society. We all dream of being a RISE Project, Recorder, or Libertatea - which publishes some incredible investigations. Obviously, if you are a*

journalist, if you want to be a good one, you dream of this. But there aren't enough of us to do this on top of everything else. And, also, maybe we lost some of our enthusiasm. You may think that it's harder here, in local media, because you're not seen as relevant by the politicians, or by the public, and even by your colleagues in the 'big media' in Bucharest; you may think that you can't further stretch the time you have to do them all," explains Barbu.

People also mention they live with the frustration that it's all for nothing, because nothing happens when they publish their stories, the state institutions that are supposed to act do nothing or only for appearances' sake. "Dogs are barking, but the caravan keeps going" is a Romanian expression that was often quoted in our discussions on this subject. Furthermore, journalists say that one of the reasons they're not getting sued as often as before is not a better understanding of the role of the media by the politicians, but the fact that they became irrelevant. "They don't care about what you're doing and what you're writing, because they know nobody will ever act against them," says a journalist. "We kind of feel it's all in vain. Readers appreciate it, but it's just not enough. You end up jaded."

"Deprofessionalisation also comes from losing interest in this profession. If you don't get any satisfaction out of it, you stop," says Vasile Hotea-Fernezan. "Looking at myself, I used to be more passionate about everything that happens in this world, I started wanting to change the world. And now, instead of doing investigations, I focus on cultural subjects, because it is easier and more interesting. On the other hand, I miss doing investigations and still read them with pleasure in other publications. The problem is that, most of the time, nothing happens after these investigations," complains Fernezan.

"I've worked in a newspaper, in a local TV station, I've been a news correspondent for Bucharest media, I've worked in a news agency, and even in radio. And the story I saw in these years in every newsroom is this deprofessionalisation of the profession," told us a journalist from a Transylvanian city. "Copy/paste can kill you professionally. I saw people that were extremely good journalists back when I entered this profession, capable of doing an amazing investigation from almost nothing, that are completely changed now, doing copy/paste five times a day and accepting information as it comes to them, with no questions asked. There are people who publish press releases as they come, even if they went to the press conference, even if they learned new information there that doesn't match the press release – which sometimes they publish even during the press conference where they're supposed to ask questions..." She moved to public radio where, even if she doesn't get a byline too often, the news is of better quality and the pay is higher.

Adrian Criş, deputy editor at Bihoreanul, in Oradea, also complains about a weakening of interest and of standards even in the case of senior journalists. "Journalists are no longer understanding what the specialists are saying, because they lack the will or the time to read and understand things. I noticed even in the case of older journalists that they don't have the time and the patience to do these informational puzzles or to read the full text of a law when it's mentioned by someone."

It's a situation found around the country. Some reporters don't even feel like they have to leave the newsroom. *"Today you just sit at your computer and receive on WhatsApp all the photos and clips from police, ambulance, from everybody. You don't have to struggle too hard,"* says Traian Deleanu. And all this information is published as it comes, leading sometimes to the same text being shared by five, six or seven media outlets. There are still newsrooms that apply the old journalism rule which asks you to verify information from multiple sources and to talk to the people involved. *"You take the phone and call and get another statement, to try at least to write something slightly different than the others,"* argues Deleanu.

*"In the absence of inhouse photojournalists or of a subscription to a photo news agency, they end up depending on 'strange' people that may not offer them the right image that they need editorially."*

Octav Ganea, Inquam Photos

The widespread practice of turning every Facebook post or comment into an article or news is toxic, considers Mona Dîrțu. *"To quote what somebody said on Facebook is not in itself something necessarily bad. What is not OK is publishing an article containing only the words of the person quoted, with no context and no reaction. There are dozens of such articles every day, including some done by Agerpres. These kinds of articles are destructive, in contradiction with the mission of the media. It's not editorial content. In these cases, the media becomes just a PR carrier of press releases, with zero editorial content. Journalists are just parroting press releases from dignitaries, organizations, or NGOs."*

Octav Ganea (Inquam Photos) says that *"journalists, or better said these copy/paste newsrooms, extend this practice to press photography, because the same way as they take a paragraph, or several, from another text (with or without attribution or permission), they also think they can take images from 'Saint Google'. They don't realise they're doing a disservice to themselves, by breaking a clear law, and they forget that, in the absence of inhouse photojournalists or of a subscription to a photo news agency, they end up depending on 'strange' people that may not offer them the right image that they need editorially."*

After they did not find a place in newsrooms for years, seasoned journalists are scarcer and this is happening in Bucharest also, where even the new media startups find it a problem. *"The journalists are missing,"* says Diana Oncioiu, from Dela0.ro. *"Here, in our bubble, you may have the impression that there's many of us, but if you search for people for a new project you realise they're not."* This lack of people is also mentioned by Victor Ilie (Inclusiv). *"For me, it's even more dramatic that you don't have the 'old school' people. Where can I find somebody to talk to, who did this job for many years? To say 'Look what I've done, look what I want to do, how do I proceed? To whom do I talk to about this? About those issues that are on the line, not necessarily unethical or illegal, because that's simple, but about those situations that raise a lot of questions for me as a journalist."*

*“I believe that in the actual media landscape, which is disastrous in many parts, niche journalism became very good. You have the two extremes of the spectrum, excellence and mediocrity, but you don’t have the middle part, coherent and strong,”* argues Julia Nagy, from Europa FM. *“If you think about it, it’s an image of our society. I don’t think we should feel total disappointment in the media, we must not think it’s already dead, because there are still good journalists out there doing their job. It’s important to reinforce mainstream journalism, because that’s the place abandoned by professionals. And mainstream media is the one that’s forming the public opinion. Somehow, niche journalism is for people that look for specific information.”*

Journalists are complaining about the lack of trainings, but most of them also admit that, usually, they are seen as a luxury or as something desirable but impossible to get, not necessarily because of lack of money. Even if most trainings are free, offered by NGOs in various projects, media managers say that, due to the small number of people in the newsroom, it’s almost impossible to replace a journalist during the time he or she spends in training. They also talk about a lack of interest for these trainings. More so, journalists themselves say that, no matter how interesting a training is, they lose money if they skip work, as their salary is often calculated based on the number of articles published. As most of them have time only for short news articles, the information offered by such a training would be useless, or even frustrating. In the case of media organizations with a different agenda than the public interest, trainings are not even taken into consideration. In their case, the lower the professional expertise of their employees, the easier it is to control them.

*“The journalists are missing... Here, in our bubble, you may have the impression that there’s many of us, but if you search for people for a new project you realise they’re not out there.”*

Diana Oncioiu, Dela0.ro.

Even so, some trainings still happen, and some journalists do come. Many of them are organized in Bucharest, for journalists here, so access to them is easier here, especially if they don’t take a long time. And even in local media, some newsrooms decided they need professional courses. *“After several years, I participated in a few trainings in Bucharest. It was a positive experience for everybody, because we took notes and even if most of what was told were things we already knew, there are some basic things that are very important, like breathing, which you do without realizing, and it’s important to be aware of them and understand them as rules,”* says Adrian Criş. Back in their newsrooms, they organized mini-sessions for their colleagues. Other journalists mentioned that they take leave from work to go to trainings.

### 3.2.3 Those who leave

Cătălin Tolontan estimates that things will take a turn for the worse in the next two years. *“People began to say they don’t want to waste their lives working in three shifts at the news desk. Journalism is not a very rewarding job, with some exceptions. Some of us that are well known are luckier, of course, we receive more money and we also have the power to get to the public, to change some things. But for the large majority of them, it’s not a motivating experience at all, and I don’t see how this can change.”*

The tendency to leave and go into public administration, where salaries are two or three times higher, at least in the case of local media, is best explained by Hannelore Petrovai, former journalist from Deva: *“Right now, in Hunedoara there are more journalists in public institutions than in newsrooms.”* Toni Hrițac says that *“in the last five years, I lost three very good journalists, that took a lot of time to professionally grow here, in the last ten years. I lost them to state institutions where they got jobs as spokespersons or PR advisers. Obviously, I can’t keep them by force.”*

Those who leave are hard to replace, if it ever happens. *“It’s hard to attract new journalists, you hire them part-time and you can’t ask too much of them, as you don’t pay them that well. Good writing disappeared, now you’re just pleased if they know the grammar and how to include some information in an article,”* tells Liviu Avram, editor-in-chief of Adevărul.

In the summer of 2019, we asked journalists a set of questions about leaving the profession. The online questionnaire was filled by 334 people, out of which 206 were women. Over 80% of the authors left the profession starting in 2009, when the media was hit by the economic crisis. The drain of professionals accelerated during the 2017-2019 period. Print media lost the most people (over 47% of answers), followed by television, with 30%.



The reality described by the people interviewed for this report was mirrored by the answers received in the questionnaire. In the last ten years, the profession registered a massive loss of experienced journalists: 31% left after 6-10 years of working in media and 37% left after 11-20 years. Most of them were reporters (48%), followed by editors (30%) and producers (9%). Editorial management (editor-in-chief, deputy editor) or technical staff (cameramen, photographers, video editors) were less represented in the answers.

The fields that took in most journalists were communications (marketing, PR, advertising, or social media) with 102 answers, followed by public administration (24 mentions), education (14) and IT (12).

The reasons mentioned were diverse, but they also can be grouped in the big categories of problems examined by this report. Most of them (129 journalists) left because of the lack of a decent wage, that comes on time (sometimes, salaries were paid after several months), doubled by job insecurity, an infernal work schedule, and lack of family time. Deprofessionalisation, the tabloidization of the news, and the toxic environment of the newsrooms were mentioned by 60 former journalists as reasons for leaving. They talk about an absence of deontological standards in the newsrooms they left, a lack of professionalism on the part of their colleagues and a lack of vision in the case of managers, and also a feeling that there is no alternative media space for them. The capture of the newsrooms by political and economic interests, censorship and masked advertorials were explicitly mentioned by 46 people.

Out of all the answers comes also a feeling of chronic tiredness, a feeling of being irrelevant, of being fed up, and burnout. It may be a reason why almost 42% of respondents said they would never return to the profession again, and 33% of them have serious doubts about it. Just under 25% of them said they want to go back to journalism.



### 3.2.4 Those that do not come

The lack of quality human resource, of talent and of people with the enthusiasm to get into this profession is felt more and more, says Cătălin Tolontan: *“For a long time now, starting with the 2009 crisis, this profession lost its glitter and attractiveness for young people. It shows, because in the last ten years there are very few young journalists capable or willing to do this job.”*

If the quality of the young people coming into journalism is argued for and against by those already in media, in the case of the journalism schools in Romania everybody agrees they are irrelevant, superficial, and completely out of touch with the actual needs of the profession or of media businesses. Răzvan Ionescu sees in them “a problem bigger than any other”. *“We can talk about media moguls or about bad advertising practices, but the truth is that many of the young people entering the profession now lack basic notions about journalism,”* says Ionescu.

*“They will need to do journalism, not to talk about it. You can feel the absence of a practical education, based more on what’s actually done in the job.”*

Constantin Trofin,  
UBB Cluj - Department of Journalism

Constantin Trofin also thinks the faculties should do more to prepare their students for what’s waiting for them in the field of actual work. *“They will need to do journalism, not to talk about it. You can feel the absence of a practical education, based more on what’s actually done in the job. It seems to me that we’re teaching more packaging and form, rather than content. You can see it in the attitude of young journalists.”* The same comment was made by Daniel Ciurel, who’s working with students in Timișoara: *“We have an academic model that’s very poorly applied. They learn about journalism, instead of learning journalism.”*

Brîndușa Armanca, herself a professor, talks about a wide gap between journalism education and practice. *“There’s no real collaboration between those who teach and the media industry. Even if the concept of internship is still formally in the curriculum, it usually ends with an almost worthless certificate, with no real experience.”*

It's another vicious cycle. Teachers say their students come to college with an improper high school education, that they lack basic notions and that it's very hard to make them catch up with the subjects taught and fill those holes. *"Unfortunately, college became a sort of high school, because we have to teach general notions at the high school level, not higher,"* says one of the teachers we interviewed. Some of them even stopped trying, but, as faculties are financed based on the number of students, there's no interest in losing them on the way, especially that journalism studies are becoming less and less popular. So in this educational circle, people are doing less, because it's too hard to change things. Everybody loses and the exceptions are few and personal in nature.

From all the interviews on this subject, another conclusion is that journalism graduates don't see themselves working in this profession. *"You may have only two, three or four of them out of several dozen that really want to do this job,"* told us some of the teachers. Andreea Pavel says that *"after the generation that's now 30-35 years old, it's going to be hard to find young people willing to do this job with passion. They lack curiosity and passion. They come out of faculties that blunt their personality and writing, rather than teach them how to question and learn. They know the theory very well but are blocked. My feeling is that, with very few exceptions, teachers confuse objectivity with comfortable questioning and weak writing."* Soft journalism, that does not bother anyone, is also mentioned by Toni Hrițac, editor-in-chief of Ziarul de Iași.

When it comes to the value of young graduates, the opinions are divided, which is a change from our previous report. If then the majority of senior journalists and media managers thought they were useless, with no understanding of the job, and only dreaming of the glory and fame of television, but incapable of writing a simple news story, we now heard a lot of voices willing to look at their own limitations in newsrooms, as editors and managers.

And on the part of the students, they have a very bad impression about the media – that it lies, exaggerates, and that every outlet became a tabloid.

*"Students have potential, but they're not given a chance to develop it. If they end up in a newsroom where there's nobody to teach them or they learn bad habits there, it's useless. Newsrooms aren't anymore the sort of places where you can feel encouraged and respected for doing your job,"* says Alice Iacobescu. The absence of a good work environment is also mentioned by Remus Florescu: *"They grow and develop in a media that's only compiling other news, not a media of original content. We can't expect them to become great journalists this way."*

*“Young people live in an era where it’s not that clear if it’s good to be a journalist, or activist, or an NGO worker, a teacher or an academic. The line isn’t as clear as before. We used to live in a different era, where the separation was obvious. Even those who did not follow the rules knew it was wrong – they intentionally chose not to apply them – to mix ads and editorial, opinion and facts, political partisanship with objectivity. Today, all this is a blur. We lost many of the benchmarks of this profession, benchmarks which I believe did not change.”*

Cătălin Tolontan

Attracting and keeping young journalists proves to be a challenge for any newsroom. Low salaries make media unattractive in big cities, like Cluj, Iași, Timișoara, or Constanța, where young people can earn a higher income as a shop salesman or marketing promoter than as a journalist. And it’s even worse in small cities. The best graduates go to Bucharest, in search of higher visibility and growth opportunities.

For their generation, print and online media (in the form in which it’s mostly done today) are unattractive products. Used to consume information in video and audio format, young people are especially attracted to these two mediums. *“We had some kids coming here, but when they saw that it’s only writing, that they don’t appear anywhere, with only a byline that’s lost on paper, because it’s very hard to make a name for yourself in print, they left after two weeks and said they actually want to do TV and radio,”* says Andreea Pavel.

Publications will have to accept they need to change, fast. The young colleagues need to be taught in the newsroom all the basic rules of the profession, but they also must teach their senior colleague all the new ways in which you can now deliver information to your public. Remus Basalic talks about his experience at Viața Liberă: *“You can’t really do without video. You may write a good article, but without a photo gallery or a video clip to back it up, it all for nothing. Graphics practically double your audience. If an article has ‘Video’ in its title, it has a thousand more views than the same ‘classic’ text.”*

*“Students arrive in dying newsrooms, editorially speaking, and are tasked with translating Daily Mail articles. Besides not helping their self-confidence, they are not even given the chance to make mistakes, because this is important in media, to have a chance to try things. When he sends a rookie out on reporting, an editor knows that in eight out of ten cases the article is unpublishable. But he can still use this to see if the young journalist has the right reflexes, even if the execution is bad. Nobody wants to work with the good parts of the students. Everybody just exploits them as work mules, with 200 news articles a day if possible, translated from Daily Mail. When they go in internships for those six months, nobody lets them phone somebody, in order to see how to obtain or verify information. ‘Look, this website is for asset declarations, and this is where you can check a company.’ There are a lot of small things they could be doing, even if they don’t stick around. Maybe they won’t like it, but they don’t even reach this point, of discovering if they like it or not, if they’re good at it or not, because you have to try it first in order to know. And it’s ok to say it’s too hard. Journalism is not an easy job, it’s actually hard, and investigations are even harder, you have to be careful what you do, to have distributive attention, to be highly organized.”*

Vlad Stoicescu

*“Even the new, young people in the newsrooms don’t know what’s normal or not. On one side, mainstream newsrooms are lacking the rules, written or tacit. On the other, unfortunately even the new media startups prove to be self-centred and self-praising, qualities that are not very productive. It’s all about the same people, winning the same prizes, but not really looking at what’s happening outside their bubble, content in reaching a small number of people. But it is true that, paradoxically, they’re a better school for young journalists. When I say it’s a paradox I mean that you would expect the big names in media, with a lot more money, to be a better school, but at the moment the small newsrooms are the ones that respect the rules of the profession.”*

Cătălin Tolontan

## 4. The erosion of media credibility

*“I’m not saying the media lost its independence, but it’s so small that the public doesn’t see it anymore. It’s like throwing a flower into a pile of shit – that flower doesn’t matter much, because it’s full of crap around it. And this is happening both at a national level, and at a local one.”* Octav Ganea, Inquam Photos.

When it comes to media consumption, television is still the main source of information for Romanians. 97% of us say that we watch TV at least once a week, over the European average of 92%. The internet is used by more than half of Romanians (58%), under the European average of 78%. Social networks are seen as a modern way of keeping up on current events, but also as a means of commenting on them, by 60% of Romanians<sup>13</sup>.

But the public’s trust in journalism’s ability to keep it informed is fading. According to a study done by the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism, only 37% of Romanian consumers of online news trust the media, which places our country on the 29th place out of 38 countries included in the research. The reasons for this reside in the problems mentioned earlier in our report, but also in the aggressive speech journalists are facing from politicians. If we add the polarization of media institutions and the degradation of the editorial standards in television, we can get a sense of how big the problem is. The media consumer trusts only the news outlets he wants to trust and guides himself by the principle of ‘who’s not with him is against him’. In all this sea of noise, neutral and critical voices seem partisan or cowardly. When the world is black and white, all the nuances disappear.

*“Yes, this loss of credibility is a growing problem, but it also comes from the fact that the profession is not populated by credible people,”* says Alice Iacobescu. *“I believe that journalism is a bit different from other professions, in this regard, meaning that the editorial or ethical line of a media institution can be set by just two people, who define the entire organization. You don’t really get to see that there are dozens of other employees there, doing their job – they don’t have the power to save it. If they work in radio or television, they’re just surviving there,”* explains Iacobescu.

The general loss of credibility was accelerated by those journalists that use their position for their personal interest, staining the reputation of the entire profession. *“Mayor Robu called us prostitutes in a press conference – explaining later on that he was just upset. He came to me and said ‘I didn’t mean you, but you know you have (within the profession) these kinds of people’. There probably are, he knows better than I whom he’s working with, but you have to back it up, you can’t throw this out to the entire media in Timișoara,”* says Bogdan Marta, from Timiș Online.

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<sup>13</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/romania/news/20190603\\_eurobarometru\\_standard\\_90\\_opinie\\_publica\\_UE\\_ro](https://ec.europa.eu/romania/news/20190603_eurobarometru_standard_90_opinie_publica_UE_ro)

Dana Humoreanu, from Monitorul de Suceava, says that she feels it most acutely *“when people come to us to speak about various issues and ask us how much would it cost for us to write on a certain issue.”*

*“Journalists were never loved, but what we’re facing now is not hate, is contempt,”* says Cătălin Moraru, a journalist with 30 years of experience in local media. *“In the last three-four years I’ve been called ‘stupid’ more times than in the last 20. There’s no doubt we do have a problem, as a profession, because many of us are really stupid and deserve contempt. But it became a general tag, for everybody. My theory is that sometimes the reader is jealous of the influence a journalist may have. If he’s so influential, he should have only opinions similar to the reader’s. This faultline in society has a big role here and the result is that the truth doesn’t really matter anymore.”*

Traian Deleanu considers that the local media is less affected by this loss of credibility than the central one: *“You deliver information that’s close to your reader. He can call and ask you to come to show you what’s wrong. You meet him on the street, because you live in the same small town. But even if it’s happening slowly, we’re still losing it, because we’re not good enough to make sure that we stick by the rules.”*

The loss of credibility is also explained by the lowering of professional standards, in some cases even a total abdication from them. *“I was working on the Caracal story. During our live transmission, the correspondent from another TV station was telling a lot of lies and then I had to work to disprove them. When I talked to him, he told me directly: ‘This is what my editors told me to say. You knew it wasn’t true, why did you waste time fact-checking it?’ The problem is that, once said, these things stay in the collective memory, changing the perception of the public. Good information, from good reporting, doesn’t help your ratings, though, so here’s another vicious cycle,”* explains Cristina Oprea from Craiova.

Carmen Dumitrescu, co-founder of Liber în Teleorman website and a former correspondent for Realitatea TV, talks about her experience: *“While working for Realitatea TV (I quit recently) I was forced to write articles about sex in order to grow the website traffic. One of my colleagues wrote such an article and the public’s reaction was negative.”* The audience can react when served content of lower quality of what was used to get.

Media outlets can be partisan, but it’s almost impossible to hide something anymore. *“You have to search for that piece of truth in multiple places – some say this, some say that, and you, the reader, have to go everywhere to get a good idea on what’s really true,”* says journalist Emilia Șercan.

The need to involve the public in a discussion on the role of journalism in a democracy, on the definition of public interest, and on the need to be informed was mentioned by several journalists and editors interviewed for this report. The way we consume information has changed, sources multiplied, and the rules seem to be relaxed for a good part of those who have this mission of informing the public. In all



this noise, the public needs to learn the new rules of media and apply them in filtering the information. After years of telling the public to believe the press, that if something is ‘in the paper’ or ‘on TV’ it’s true, we now have to teach it otherwise and its trust in media is highly eroded.

*“We are more and more influenced by media, but we don’t really know how it works and what’s its mission, or how to differentiate between a journalist, an influencer, a vlogger, and a politician,”* says Codruța Simina. *“We need media literacy, we need to explain the role of journalism, to explain that our fundamental mission is to inform the public. We need to start there.”*

The National Audiovisual Council (CNA), the main regulatory body for television and radio in Romania, tasked with maintaining the law and the audiovisual code of conduct, is described by all the people interviewed as one of the main culprits for the current landscape of Romanian television and radio. Despite the fact that it has a legal base that guarantees its independence, including 6 year mandates for its members (freeing them to act on a medium term, not just a short one), in the last few years the council failed constantly in accomplishing its mission of ensuring *“free expression and responsibility to the public”*.

*“CNA doesn’t exist, it’s shameful,”* says Alice Iacobescu. *“If it would exist, we wouldn’t hear all this crap. It’s unacceptable, especially because people tend to believe and consider a model what they see and hear on tv.”* A feeling shared by Cristian Pantazi: *“In the last few years, CNA’s performance was so low that it’s not even a subject anymore. The expectations are so low that it doesn’t even matter anymore. It’s not right, we wish it would be different, but we accepted it as fact, we marked it as a non-functioning institution.”* This irrelevance of CNA affects the freedom of expression and there’s a risk that, on the long term, it leads to more regulation. Most of the time, the public, but also some of the journalists, think that the reason CNA isn’t working is that it has no legal power. Frustrated by the low quality of TV content, especially during ‘hot’ events (electoral campaigns or dramatic events), people ask for laws to solve the problem. But this law already exists and it says clearly what you can or cannot do as a journalist in the audiovisual mediums. *“In my view, what’s missing – and maybe that’s why you see misconducts so clearly – is a consistent enforcement of the regulations by the CNA, which seems to act with different sets of standards for every case. The TV stations in Bucharest, hungry for subjects, find some obscure websites with a dubious claim and note that ‘X said this to this publication’, so they wash their hands of any wrongdoing and don’t take responsibility for anything,”* told us one of the local correspondents we interviewed.

Even in all this general noise, the reality is not all dark. Journalists say that, even if trust in media is at a very low level, personal reputation can start to build back credibility. *“The loss of credibility, either through connections with politics, or by using media as an economic instrument, affects us all, but the appearance of these new voices in media startups and the work of some journalists in mainstream media, in the last three years, offer some hope that things are not completely out of control, or unfixable,”* thinks Cristian Pantazi.

An opinion shared by Liviu Avram: *“There are some media institutions that are still seen as relatively OK and people turn to them during important events. The rest, the mob, try to feed on carcasses, but even here I think things are not getting worse.”*

Vlad Stoicescu says that *“there are areas in Romanian media that completely lost their credibility in the last ten years, the best example being Evenimentul Zilei, once the most important newspaper in Romania, which has now effectively disappeared from the market, transformed into a website that’s hard to pinpoint, between Cancan and Știri pe Surse. But other areas grew their credibility. The independent media now has a greater level of credibility, compared to 2011, when we launched our publication and were almost alone on this market.”* Costin Ionescu believes that it’s true that there’s a new wave in media, with journalists opening new media products, with new models and a fresh enthusiasm, but it doesn’t mean everybody else stayed behind: *“ProTV or Adevărul are still relevant media institutions.”*

This new media wave is mentioned and praised by Emilia Șercan, especially because it takes on subjects ignored by mainstream media. *“They write about lots of courageous subjects and, even if they’re not as frequent, they are necessary for the public. It’s important that the public sees this kind of topics in the media and my feeling is that they manage to stimulate a competition between journalists, which was gone.”*

The president of APPC association of journalists, Remus Florescu, believes that the profession is split between those who believe that the end justifies the means, who came to the conclusion that it can’t be done differently, and those who don’t agree with this. *“You can say there’s a balance between those two camps, but the fact that the first one is more vocal and powerful on its mediums makes it more visible and may seem dominant,”* believes Florescu.

Victor Ilie thinks that journalists should differentiate themselves from the non-journalists who are misusing this name and that it’s important they ‘demystify’ their profession in order to explain themselves and win back the trust of the public. *“We should stop this hypocrisy of the profession. After so many years in which we demanded transparency from everybody, we now refuse to say what we’re actually doing. Which is super-absurd. I think it’s important that we explain ourselves. After you explain to people what it is that you do, they become your ‘apostles’. Corrupt journalists don’t have this luxury,”* says Ilie.

Diana Oncioiu thinks that the profession is not ready to signal its own faults. *“Look at the story with Guran<sup>14</sup>. You have some voices, we had the public position taken by CJI that it’s not OK, but other than that there was no general reaction. We don’t do it between ourselves. We didn’t have a discussion inside our profession on whether it’s OK to take a five-month vacation to do communications for a political party, or to be a political consultant and then return to the media. It doesn’t seem right to me, but we should decide this at the level of the entire profession if it’s possible or not. This sort of ballet can be a reason for the loss of credibility. We have this impression that readers are stupid, but they’re not. They will surely ask you in*

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.cji.ro/jurnalismul-si-activitatea-politica-sunt-doua-meserii-incompatibile>

*the future: 'For whom are you writing now?'*

*Vlad Stoicescu considers that "no system in this world ever wants to change by itself. It must be forced, either by the public, or by the profession. The landscape will not change just because we, some of us, notice that certain things are wrong. In general, systems change because of pressure, which can be of two kinds: from the outside (the public), or from the inside, which needs a critical mass of professionals to set new rules and norms, accepted in corpore by everybody - and applied. Because it's not enough to have rules known by everybody, we also need the obligation to respect them."*

*Ethics are almost a marginal subject in media and 'deontolog' (a person who talks about deontology) became a swear word. "If you do what's right in this job you're seen as a sucker, because the majority doesn't respect the rules anymore," says Anca Spânu. "You have minors presented on TV in ways they should not be, with no parental agreement. You see horror images from car crashes, blood on the road, etc. You also don't have real sources anymore. OK, you can't get the classic three sources, but get at least two. Usually, there's a single source for that information, which often fails. In this context, it's hard to inform people, because it's difficult to convince somebody that he should search for another source, to check the information, even if it comes from the Police."*

Mica Sváb also talks about journalists who launch fake news in the public space. *“There are a lot of dubious people that go online or on Facebook, hiding under nicknames, and launch a subject in the virtual space like ‘Sensational: Sources tell us there was a murder on street X’. And people start commenting on it. It’s not fair, because, as a responsible journalist, I have to do my research, I have to check the information from two or three independent sources (prosecutor’s office, police, ambulance, etc.) and only then publish my article, while they already served the public an empty news text. And if they’re proven wrong, nobody sanctions them, while every mistake I make takes away from my credibility.”*

The media was always a trampoline towards politics at the local level, but also to ‘big politics’, in Bucharest. The list includes Radu Mazăre, Gabriela Firea, Robert Turcescu, Rareș Bogdan, Carmen Avram, or Moise Guran. A special case is that of Liviu Alexa, owner of a local media organization, the best-known product being Ziar de Cluj. Alexa also called himself a journalist, not just an owner. For four months (September 2019 – January 2020), Alexa was also the interim president of PSD Cluj organization, and still called himself a ‘journalist’, while constantly attacking other journalists. This ambiguity sustained by some of the names that switched from journalism to politics decredibilizes the profession and makes it even more vulnerable in front of the public.

## 5. The capture of mass-media

*“When this media, be it good or bad, will not exist anymore, at that moment people will get their information from blogs and small websites that can easily be bought, and we’ll be done. This only benefits them, the politicians, regardless of their position on the ideological spectrum.”* Bogdan Marta, Timiș Online

The Romanian media was never independent in its entirety. During periods of economic boom, when the money from advertising was sufficient to help them develop, adding to the income generated by subscriptions and newsstand sales, local media was strong. Communities had voices that served the public mandate, even if back then politics, business and part of media were going hand in hand. The 2008 economic crisis brought a powerful blow especially to independent media organizations, because they were left without their main fuel - the money from commercial advertising. The crisis overlapped with the dissolution of the classical business model of mass-media, when people stopped paying for content when the same information could be found on the internet. Because these two main sources of income disappeared, traditional media contracted or closed, leaving even more space for small media publications or “parasite websites”, as Cătălin Moraru calls them. *“Most of the political parties and decision makers in the administrative sphere had their own, anonymous website – a parasite website that copied news from the people that actually went out to report and sometimes published their own ‘content’ – an interview with the mayor or the prefect,”* explains Moraru. *“This is the most toxic model, because they sell it as editorial content, when in fact they only serve propaganda.”*

If the control was mainly political during the 2004-2014 period, the media being owned by politicians, directly or through intermediaries, today you just have to pay for content. *“You don’t even have to buy a publication, you just rent it. You get what you pay for, by article, and the financial weight of this type of deal is so small, that it’s easy to do dark deals. Before, it was hard to hide these payments, because it was a lot of money, but now they are talking about a hundred euro,”* tells Toni Hrițac, manager of Ziarul de Iași. At the same time, this attitude isn’t just reserved for politicians. Media managers talk about how hard it is to convince the business sector that not everybody accepts unmarked advertorials – advertising that looks just like editorial content, paid by companies.

There are also media institutions where the political line is clear and publicly acknowledged. In those newsrooms, the journalists assume the owner’s agenda and transform it into their personal one. Remus Florescu talks about the moment when his organisation, APPC, wrote to then PSD president, Viorica Dăncilă, regarding the aggressive and violent language used by Liviu Alexa (the then president of the PSD Cluj party organisation) in attacking the local journalists that were critical of him. *“It’s a strong mentality of... I’m going to use a very harsh term, that of a slave. People don’t stop to think anymore that they’re working for a temporary owner, that their institution would not last forever. This made me most sad in our conflict with Ziar de Cluj. I would have understood if those journalists kept quiet about their owner’s behaviour. But they started to attack us. This means that, besides the fact that they*

*don't realise their own shameful situation, they took initiative to please the owner. It's a serious case of brainwashing."*

Things are not very different in Bucharest, where the national media organisations are headquartered. Brîndușa Armanca considers that the *"mogulization of the Romanian media, especially of television, generated a wave of opportunism, involving the overlook and breaking of every ethical norm of the profession. The Romanian owners impose on their newsrooms conditions that have nothing in common with the public interest, but only with their own private interests. Unfortunately, most newsrooms accepted this deal. When I say newsrooms, I don't mean each and every journalist there, but mainly the heads of those newsrooms. They were paid very well to produce this transformation of the media into an instrument of propaganda. At the present time, the public shamelessness grew so much that they don't even hide anymore and do all these inadmissible things in the open. It's not honesty or transparency, it's shamelessness."*

*"Here, in Bucharest, things are very serious, because here you have all the stations with national coverage. It's a very serious and widespread phenomenon. Think of all those people in those newsrooms – they got there after the system was already infected, and they don't come in contact with anything different. They don't even get to ask themselves questions about it. It's the medium you grew in, so the feeling is that this is normal,"* says Alice Iacobescu. She also talks about how hard it is for a journalist that wants to do his job in these institutions. *"From the perspective of an active journalist, the support should come from multiple places, especially from the direct manager, not necessarily the owner. It should come from managers, that need to act as a protective wall around journalists in those cases where the pressure comes from the owner. Ideally, it should come from the owner. Almost ideally, the owner should not care. Unfortunately, we're far from ideal. I've never worked in many newsrooms; I've stayed for ten years in one place and eight years in another. But I still felt, at some point, the personal interest of the owner or of those immediately under him,"* says Iacobescu.

*"If the media managers would have 'some spine', the pressures acting on the journalist would diminish. But most of the time, the pressure is not felt directly, it's sort of an intuitively guessed pressure. We get the picture instantly of what the editor is saying and self-censure."*

Alice Iacobescu, Europa FM

Today, the most powerful form of control is represented by the public money flowing to mass-media. Orando Toader points to the actions of local administrations of limiting the independence of journalists, or even whole publications. *“Things are very simple, especially in the local media, where it’s the main financial source. Administrations prefer to have some channels of media communication that they support from the public budget, in one way or another, through various kinds of events or through those cultural centers that sprang all across the country. So you have discrepancies between the media that wants to stay independent, with journalists that want to do their job as it should be done, and on the other part those who are ‘helped’ to stay alive. Some are doing fine; some are doing worse. It’s hard to deal with such problems,”* says Toader.

Accepting contracts with public funding doesn’t automatically mean renouncing independence. Andreea Pavel, from Info Sud-Est, says that *“we also signed some contracts, even if for a while we kind of stayed away from them, but we still have contracts in which we republish their press releases. The first thing we did was to look in those contracts and to read to the letter those dubious stipulations, like ‘one must not hurt the image of the institution’. We changed all that and later published articles showing irregularities done by the head of the administration we had that contract with. And we managed to keep that contract, with no pressure. But self-censorship is way more dangerous than direct censorship, because you don’t even give yourself the chance to see if you lose the contract or not.”* Cătălin Moraru also says that more and more contracts have ‘non-aggression clauses’, including those signed with public institutions. *“Initially, we did not accept them; now we just ignore that clause. But even if it’s not clearly stipulated in the contract, this kind of clause is there, implied and clearly assumed.”* In this relation, it matters how hard are the managers willing to fight for their editorial independence. Sometimes, the critical tone of a publication makes it ‘ineligible’ for contracts with that institution. Mica Sváb tells that *“We feel this in the case of City Hall in Baia Mare. If you don’t serve the mayor, then... For example, the Chestnut Festival is the festival of the city, so of course it has to be promoted by the administration. And you can see which are its media clients by looking for those who promoted the festival.”*

In cities where, for the first time there’s no control from the local chief politician, like in Constanța, where the ‘opposition’ publications had a very tough life under Radu Mazăre, the journalistic reflex of being critical kind of diminished in strength.

*“In those regions where you had small dictators, like Mazăre in Constanța, where newsrooms that did real journalism faced some hard times, things are changing now, transparency grew, there’s no such pressure anymore, things tend to relax, and journalists to become more comfortable - but this may be dangerous on the long term. And if nobody is entering the profession anymore, the moment we’ll face a new tense situation we won’t have the necessary antibodies or the instruments to fight it,”* explains Cristian Leonte, editor-in-chief of Info Sud-Est.

The few media institutions with foreign investors, like Europa FM or Pro TV or local publications like Timiș Online and Arad Online, are a little bit more fortunate. *“The fact that we have an owner that’s outside Romania can really help the publication, because nobody knows his phone number, even I don’t have it. That’s extraordinary. It’s the only place I would rather work, because we avoid mixing things with the interests of local media moguls,”* says Bogdan Marta from Timiș Online.

Liviu Avram explains that, most times, self-censorship is invisible. *“That’s why it’s self-censorship,”* says Avram. *“The journalist doesn’t even tell his boss anymore that he has a certain story, he keeps to himself, afraid that something might happen. Certainly, less and less original stories come from reporters. The cause here can be that they can’t discover a potential subject, or that they have the information but kill it out of fear. You can’t reproach them, because they still bring in general subjects – but everybody writes what you’re writing. The difference is made with exclusive stories, brought by your own people. But if they stop pitching original stories, every newspaper and every TV station looks the same,”* says Avram.

Sometimes, reporters learn to self-censor from their own editors and managers. *“When I worked for the newspaper and the local television, things were clear, that the newsrooms were subordinated to the political sphere. Not officially, but everybody knew it. That meant not only direct censorship, but also self-censorship. First time you naively go and report your news, come back to the newsroom to find it didn’t go through, you ask why not, and they explain to you, in a subtle or blunt way, that it wasn’t on the right line. And next time you won’t do it,”* tells a local journalist. *“I’m just a reporter and don’t feel this pressure that much. The pressure is on my managers, because the big boss doesn’t call us to tell us ‘you can’t write about this’, he calls them. There were cases when my immediate boss protected us. He talked to us, ‘watch out on this subject’, negotiated with us if we’re writing on it or not, and how. Sometimes I would get angry and write my article and give it to them that way, saying: ‘If you don’t like it, you change it, but I’m not writing your way.’ And they did, because they couldn’t afford at that time to fire me. They still can’t afford to lose a person, because they can’t find another one.”* In such situations, journalists feel alone and vulnerable. Most times, they don’t fight back because they know that their managers cannot rewrite their stories forever. They also know, looking around them, that ‘everybody does it’. And that those who don’t have it harder. Sometimes, this is the environment they see first, when they enter the profession, with nobody to teach them about editorial independence.

*“When I got my first job as a journalist, in 2007, they were screaming at me that if I don’t like it, there are a hundred more like me at the door. Well, they are not anymore, and the bosses started to change their attitude, or at least having a more human reaction about what they know we must do.”*

*A local journalist from Brașov*

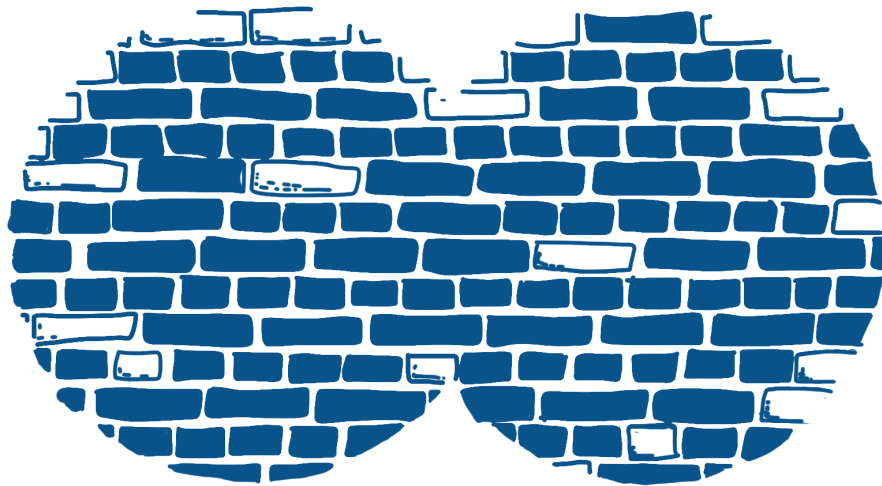


The use of state institutions as instruments for political pressure is not seen as often as before. In the last few years, the best known cases were those of RISE Project and Hotnews. In 2017, after a series of articles about the business dealings of Liviu Dragnea, the then president of PSD party, RISE Project and Hotnews were verified by economic inspectors from ANAF. They asked the journalists to show them every fiscal document they had and then, at the beginning of 2018, ANAF released, anonymously, confidential information about RISE Project donors. They were turned into press articles and some donors, like the Embassy of Netherlands, were accused of interfering in the internal affairs of the country by financing journalists critical to 'the state'. In November 2018, after a new series of articles on the business dealings of Liviu Dragnea, RISE Project was asked by the National Authority for the protection of Personal Data to publish the names of their sources. The inspectors motivated their request by invoking the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and threatened the journalists with the maximum fine of 20 million euro. The national and international reactions were loud and sharp, and the authority dropped its request.

Because investigations are missing from many media outlets, the tendency of the authorities to 'punish' the press is not absolute anymore, although, for critical journalists in Bucharest or 'problematic' counties, like Teleorman, the 2016-2019 period was tough. Octav Ganea says that the 'Dragnea period' was very harmful for journalists, a comment shared by Costin Ionescu: *"The relation between politicians and journalists was very bad, especially in the case of access to information. If the Năstase period was defined by a strong and direct control, under Dragnea there was an even greater pressure, including threats that were explicit in nature, non-stop, and in the open."* Andreea Pavel says that what's happening in Bucharest is a signal and an alarm for local media: *"I'm worried about this wave of threats addressed to journalists in Bucharest, because if things get out of control there, we're going to disappear at the first sign."* Pavel refers to the death threats received by journalists Emilia Șercan and Diana Oncioiu, and to the aggressive attitude of several heads of public institutions, like the director of the Sfânta Maria hospital in Bucharest, who asked Digi24 to open an internal investigation in the case of journalist Carla Cristina Tănăsie, because she reported on a serious case of malpractice there.

We also hear about threats in the local media. If journalists from the central media react when their colleagues are threatened, people in local media say they feel alone. Journalist Carmen Dumitrescu din Teleorman, author of several articles about Liviu Dragnea's financial dealings, says that one of the biggest problems she feels is the lack of protection for journalists, facing all these threats alone. *"I was followed by somebody in my building's staircase and the policeman I called just recommended me a pepper spray, because 'you should have expected to get into trouble; I'm surprised nothing serious happened to you until now,'" explains Dumitrescu.*

Adrian Criş says that for them, in Oradea, “the last few years saw a dimming of the pressure, but a rise in threats, not addressed at the newsroom as a whole, but to individual journalists. We publicly assumed that we’re a paper that doesn’t hate anybody, but we don’t like what PSD is doing. For a while, PSD tried to buy us, rent us, seduce us, but they gave up after they saw they could not do it, and since then there are always small threats and harassment. For example, PSD never lets us know when they organize a press conference. And the leader of the local PSD organisation, who is also a college professor, threatened and insulted me personally.”



## 6. Public institutions as black boxes

Public and local authorities never excelled when it came to transparency. However, journalists say that, in recent years, it has become almost impossible to force the institutions to obey the law and be transparent. Press conferences are absent, the requests for public interest information are answered after long delays, or never come, or are incomplete; the sources within the institutions are afraid to speak, and the representatives of the authorities or the politicians refuse to attend programs, other than those of ‘friendly’ TV stations or radios.

Alice Iacobescu from Europa FM says that *“it has become almost impossible to have a senior official, a minister for example, to come and answer questions in an interview. It was completely impossible during the time of PSD ministers. And it is almost impossible now, with the PNL ministers. They confirm they will attend the interviews but, a few hours before, they cancel. That’s if they even answer the phone. Then, in the evenings, I see them in TV studios. The time of our show may not work for them, but we proposed all the hours in the world - in the morning, at noon, in the evening. We are on air in the evening, but we can record during the day.”*

*“I think it’s very simple to make the press look irrelevant, when it can’t interact with the people responsible for governing”. (Alice Iacobescu, Europa FM)”*

*Alice Iacobescu, Europa FM*

The same happens in local televisions. *“We took the initiative to go to the prefecture, because of the constant rejections of certain public institutions of giving us the information we asked for, or to come to our shows. And we said: ‘People, is it so hard to do this job, of giving the public simple information? Why are you making me, in 2019 Romania, register written applications in order for Bucharest to approve you to come to a show?’ Ten years ago, we worked much easier, you just called them and they came to the show, with no paper needed. I would rather not do the show with them in these conditions. Eventually, two of them came, out of twenty,”* says Mica Sváb.

APPC sued the Cluj City Hall in May 2019, because mayor Emil Boc did not organize any press conference for a year and half, even if he’s obliged by legislation of freedom of information. The law stipulates that press conferences must be held “usually once a month”, but they don’t mention a mandatory interval for them. *“Unfortunately, we lost in the first court, even if it’s two years now since he organized the last press conference. We’re still waiting for the court motivation,”* says Florescu. *“This tells us that they don’t really care about the media anymore.*

*We sued the City Hall because they are the most visible, but we also sent requests to other institutions, to hospitals for example. Nobody does press conferences; it means they don't care anymore and that the media doesn't pressure them enough to do it. There were huge scandals regarding some hospitals in Cluj and no conference was ever held,"* tells Florescu. Mayor Emil Boc defended by saying that he goes to some radio shows and that he's using 'online means' to communicate the activity of the institution. Emil Boc is not the only politician that chose to cut the journalists out of the loop and deliver information directly to the public. *"Many now prefer to publish on Facebook. They don't send anything to newsrooms anymore, but publish the information directly, in order to market themselves, and then maybe send me a link saying: 'look, I've published something, see if it interests you and take it;"* tells Bogdan Marta.

Any form of communication on the activity of an institution is welcomed, but journalists have a clear role of being critical about the information communicated by politicians and of asking questions, demanding clarifications. No matter how 'unpleasant' they may be for politicians, press conferences and discussions with all journalists, not only 'friendly' ones, are fundamental for the good of the community.

*"The information they send us is not good, or it must be pried from them with a crowbar, and the official sources lie with every breath. They rely on the fact that we're doing a sort of minimal journalism, on the fact that nobody verifies what they're saying. Those who do become persona non grata,"* says Cătălin Moraru. *"When it comes to unofficial sources, people are afraid, more than usual, because they have a lot to lose – state workers, especially. I have huge subjects I'm documenting, but those who signalled them to us changed their minds and beg us not to write, because they won't admit to anything. For any information, even neutral ones, you need to use the FOIA law,"* explains Moraru. This problem is also mentioned by health journalists. The hospital directors, assigned by political criteria, are afraid to talk to health journalists, so not to 'inconvenience anybody', that's why it's hard for relevant information to reach the public.

Journalist Emilia Șercan talks about the efforts to limit the access to information, by using exceptions to the law or never actually responding. *"The text of the law is misinterpreted, in many cases is actually rewritten – I found this in many communications or in lawsuits I had, were they invoked stipulations that were not in the actual text of the law. Some institutions actually prefer to sue them, like the Academy of National Security Sciences (ASSN) or the National School for Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA),"* tells Șercan. *"I just sued them, but it's going to take a year, at best, to close a suit and get the information I requested – that is, if I win. The kind of information I ask it's not perishable; I can use it even after a year. The problem is that, by blocking my access, they try to delay, hoping to discourage me,"* says Șercan. *"There are also institutions that answer me in an ultra-correct manner, because they know I have the habit of suing. But I don't think it's normal that I get this information, as it is normal, but another journalist doesn't, just because they know he's not going to sue them,"* adds Șercan.

She also mentions that, since May 2018, the new GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is being used by some authorities to stop the access of journalists to public interest information. GDPR became a leitmotif in the speech of those who don't want to offer information, but don't want to simply refuse access to them. *"Information defined by default as public, like the CVs of civil servants or of elected official, doctoral thesis, documents that refer to competitions for public positions, the lists of advisors, etc, are blocked by invoking GDPR, even if all this data is public information according to the legislation,"* says Şercan. One of the best known cases in which a public institution invoked GDPR in order to reduce the access of the public to information is the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), which removed from its website the list of the owners of TV-radio licences, even if the transparency of the investment structure of television and radio stations is fundamental for ensuring pluralism and freedom of media<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>[https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media\\_publicitate-23076053-lista-proprietarilor-radio-disparut-site-cna-institutia-invoca-gdpr-pentru-ingreunarea-accesului-informatii.htm](https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-23076053-lista-proprietarilor-radio-disparut-site-cna-institutia-invoca-gdpr-pentru-ingreunarea-accesului-informatii.htm)



## 7. Professional solidarity - an impossible dream as the solution

*“I think we should start to think about walking together, in spite of the huge egos inherent in this profession; that we either unite, or we die one by one, alone in our individual pride.” Codruța Simina, PressOne*

The lack of association of journalists, in one form or another, be it a syndicate or a professional association, is one of the problems mentioned most often in our interviews. It's a solution in the efforts to clean the profession, but also an almost impossible mission to accomplish. They lack money and time, and the fragmentation of media organizations multiplied exponentially the number of personal or institutional agendas, hidden or expressed, that must be negotiated and harmonized. Moreover, the new sector of recent media startups, which is closest to this idea of self-regulation and association, is also overwhelmed by the number of roles it must play at the same time – they're journalists, managers, social media managers, fundraisers, etc.

*“The problem is the lack of a credible voice for the industry, to aggregate all the things we talk about, that goes and represents us when dialogue is possible,”* says Cristian Pantazi. At the same time, he considers that association is not feasible, because of the *“huge differences in opinions and positioning between all the different players. And the new wave of journalism has a chronic lack of time. It's hard to tell me that now I also have to be a ‘union man’.”* The same problem is mentioned by Orlando Toader, who used to have plans for a local professional association in Arad, a few years ago. He gave up on this idea. *“It's very hard in this profession, especially now, with these 15 online publications in Arad. Everybody looks after his own interest and doesn't really want to associate. Although almost all of us work for the same thing – informing the public – we are hampered by the fact that we're on different parts of the political spectrum, that we're divided, incapable of coming together.”*

Cătălin Moraru talks about the need for association in the case of media organizations and unions. *“Part of the problems facing the profession could be diminished through a collaboration between the different media outlets from all around the country, working on important subjects.”* He says that professional associations are important, if they're done using strict admission criteria, because *“it's useless to criticize the journalists if their boss is a party member. No journalist dreams of writing crap after college, most of them want to do their job in an honest fashion. No professional association or union protects them from this danger. But since it involves dealing with people, and knowing how the political sphere wants to dominate mass-media, it can easily turn into something else, pretty fast.”*

Vlad Stoicescu is of the opinion that the profession is ready for association, and to publicly adhere to a set of professional standards, but the media organizations are not. *“We have a lot of people in the newsrooms that go out to report the news, they go to Parliament and bring you the daily news, in good faith, but it’s not only up to them. I think it’s overly ambitious to reach a formula for association agreed by everybody – actually, I think it’s impossible. I think it’s important to begin with small sectors and start the change from there.”*

Codruța Simina also considers that it’s important for journalists to find some formula for association. *“In the long term, this seems to be the solution: an association for journalists with a clear mandate to respect their mission of informing the public. In two-three years I don’t think it would still be possible to say that we’re three people and we’re gonna start a publication,”* says Simina, adding that a higher level of cohesion would also ‘clean up’ the profession.

The same idea is mentioned by Răzvan Ionescu, publisher at Recorder, one of the founders of an association for journalists from a few years back. He says that it’s essential that this project must be replicated, even if it’s hard. *“This type of association of the media must be accomplished, otherwise it will be hard for us to find formulas for breaking free of this morass. We can’t use individual solutions, we need to have several strong, mainstream media organizations. You can’t fix things in the long-term with only three, four people,”* considers Ionescu.



## 8. Possible solutions

The solutions to mass-media's problems are by no means easy, especially when we consider that these are international afflictions, with local mutations.

At the moment, when it comes to solutions to mass-media's problems, the answers are still individual in nature: media products that create and exploit a favourable context in order to grow. Raising the level of involvement on the part of the public in cleaning and strengthening journalism is the safest solution, even if it's also the hardest in the actual context.

Speaking about possible solutions to systemic problems, the media professionals interviewed for this report considered several directions that seem rather aspirational in nature at the moment.

Involving the public in financing journalism, doubled by a diversification of revenue streams for media products, are the main solutions mentioned often in our discussions. Multiple sources of income are vital in order to limit the impact of losing a certain funding model or an investor that backs out when journalists write on 'sensible' subjects – either private investors, big companies, or state authorities.

The public's support for editorial projects must be accompanied by a better understanding of the role it plays in society. The need for people to learn and understand how to find and filter information is mentioned constantly. Media literacy became a necessity. Without citizens that understand how mass-media works, be it social media, journalism, or YouTube content, without clear benchmarks and basic abilities to check information and media sources, to discern between facts and opinions, between verified content and advertorials, the entire society weakens. Media literacy does not mean only learning about fake news and is not a wonder drug, but it can serve as a good start. The profession must be part of this discussion, in an effort to regain the trust of the public.

Journalists consider that media literacy must be taught in schools and that teachers must be able to address these subjects. The models proposed vary from standalone subjects, like math or literature, to infusing media literacy in other subjects, and even classes taught in schools by journalists. *“Yes, people don’t trust the media anymore,”* says Ligia Voro. *“I would like to do media literacy in schools, so they can learn the difference of having multiple sources or how to verify information. We’re in 2020 and people still don’t know how the administration works, or how the budget is spent.”*

In this context in which confidence in journalism is at low levels all over the world, regaining public trust is the first medium and long-term challenge that the profession has to accept. Increasing transparency by explaining the editorial processes, starting conversations with the audience, returning to the actual needs of the communities may seem simple and small steps, but they imply sustained effort from the newsrooms. As one of the journalists in Arad told us: *“No matter how good an investigation is, you still rely on death for traffic.”* Publishers know that trust is not regained with news about car crashes and deaths, nor with scandals and celebrities, but this is “what sells”. In the long term, in order for journalism to become trustworthy more and more media institutions need to accept the fact that they will lose readers on the short term by investing in in-depth content. Studies on journalism show that “more is not necessarily better<sup>16</sup>”.

In our discussions, journalists and publishers went back constantly to the subject of associations as a method to protect journalists and also as means to regain the trust of the public. But association is harder to accomplish in the present context, in which those that desire it are fighting for survival, having workloads that leave them no time for other projects. Even so, this idea must be on our agenda. It’s necessary that the voice of journalists grows stronger and starts to condemn the unethical parts of the profession –also talking about good practices. No matter how frustrating or tiring this new load may be, without solidarity the profession will further slip into irrelevance, weighted down by those who profit from the weakening of the professional identity of journalists.

The idea of association must be tried by publishers that need a common voice when they complain about discretionary assignment of advertising, the practice of huge discounts in ad contracts, or any other issue challenging the industry at the present time.

Journalism schools are also part of the solution. The change will take years and will require a strong investment of will and patience from those who will teach the future generation of journalists. As in the case of the entire industry, journalism schools need fundamental changes in order to catch up to the present requirements of the profession. First of all, it’s necessary to refresh and update the curriculum and adapt it to the technological realities of a digital future. There’s also the need to ‘reprofessionalise’ some of the teaching staff, say journalists. “You can’t teach the same things,” argues Emilia Şercan, who also teaches the ‘Investigative Journalism’ class at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Science in Bucharest.

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<sup>16</sup><https://digiday.com/media/publishers-growing-audiences-producing-less-content/>

*“For example, we have a course of ‘print media production’. What is its relevance now? Rather than teach this, maybe do a writing and editing class, or bring the student closer to the present reality,”* explains Şercan. Least, but not last, schools must invest in their equipment and technology. In many classes around the country, journalism students ‘learn television’ using old TV cameras – and then go vlogging on their own high-tech digital cameras.

People in the profession also mentioned various solutions for specific problems, that may snowball into fixing larger problems. Stimulating the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) and the public television and radio to focus more on the public interest is the most important intervention in this sector. But here, the solutions belong to the political vectors, which need to surrender control over these institutions and stop considering that, because they’re funded from the state budget, they belong to them. A uniform application of the audiovisual code by CNA would clean up the audiovisual landscape and would show the public that TV and radio can be done the right way. By limiting political control, TVR, the Public radio, and Agerpres could set the tone of public interest journalism, because they have both the money and the resources for this kind of journalism.





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