

CONTROL AND FREEDOM OF MEDIA

JOURNALISTS' TESTIMONIES



This project
is funded by
The European Union

The research project 'Freedom and Control of Media: Journalists' Testimonies' was conducted by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation (SCF) from October to December 2017. It is part of the joint project "Public Money for Public Interest – Support to the Civil Sector Initiatives for Public Interest", carried out by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) and the SCF, with the support of the European Union.

Author:
Jovanka Matić

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to collect the experiences of journalists in Serbia with different forms of control of their work and informative news content over the course of the preceding 12 months, then to identify the strongest sources of control influences and their most common forms, as well as the mechanisms that give those sources the power to utilise media outlets for the purposes of certain special interests.

As forms of control, the research defined the actions of specific individuals or organisations whose goal is to influence the work of journalists in a way that limits journalists' professional autonomy and the public's right to know.

As control mechanisms, the research defined characteristics of the media sector that enable sources of control to have the power to limit the functioning of the media in the service of public interest and democratic processes, while promoting their own special interests.

As the most important sources of control, the research highlighted editors, media company management and media owners (as internal influencers), and state bodies, political parties and advertisers (as external influencers).

The experiences of journalists were collected through an online survey of 177 journalists, as well as through in-depth interviews with 10 journalists from different media outlets for which indications exist that they were exposed to strong pressure exerted by either external or internal sources.

The research used a non-probability convenience sample. It is not representative of the entire body of journalists, but is valid for drawing conclusions about the research topics, as it includes journalists with extremely diverse professional and demographic characteristics, and with various experiences with influences of control.

Participants in this survey work in media outlets that are different in type (TV, radio, print, online), audience reach (national, regional, local) and ownership structure, while they also do different jobs (39% journalists, 25% editors, 8% editors-in-chief, 5% owners or directors, 3% photo-reporters and cameramen, 8% currently unemployed) and differ in terms of gender, age, education level, employment status and the length of their professional work experience.



*When someone says that we should call someone from the opposition, just watch how the editors start turning green, then say "Yes, yes, we certainly should, but we'll wait a bit."
(National television journalist)*

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

1. Most common sources and forms of control influences

In their daily work, journalists more commonly encounter control influences coming from external sources rather than internal ones.

The most common influences come from state bodies and political parties, then from editors, while the least common influence is from advertisers. Influences from the government have the strongest influence on the work of journalists.

Unjustified intervention in journalists' work is very common:

69% of surveyed journalists encountered at least one form of influence coming from a representative of a government body;

56% encountered at least one form of influence coming from a representative of a political party;

47% encountered at least one form of influence coming from their editors;

41% encountered at least one form of influence coming from company management;

33% encountered at least one form of influence coming from advertisers;

30% encountered at least one form of influence coming from the media owner.



*Pressure from the Government – that is the most important and most powerful influence.
(Public service journalist)*

*Nobody will abandon their media influence. Whichever government comes, it will exercise influence in one way or another.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*The strongest pressures come from the combined interests of politics and corporations.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

2. Control influences on the media from external sources

2.1. Forms and frequency of control influences of the authorities

Public authorities are the most common and strongest sources of influence. This is particularly so in the case of crisis situations and during election campaigns.

The consequence of these influences, according to one interviewed journalist, is that informative news programming used to be “politics, politics,

politics, sport and weather”, while now it is “Vučić, Vučić, Vučić, sport and weather”.

On average, 46% of survey respondents said that they had either individual or group (within the newsdesk) experience with some form of control influence from the public authorities, while 32% said they had no such experience.

A minimum of around half of respondents encountered six forms of control influences from government bodies on the work of their newsrooms:

69% encountered refusals from a government body representative to provide information, statements or grant interviews to their media outlet;

67% encountered dissatisfaction from officials of government bodies in response to the specific reporting of their media outlet, related in contacts with the media owner or its editors;

62% encountered systematic discrimination against their media outlet (regular refusals to provide information, failure to receive funding approval after applying for various project co-financing tenders, failure to be invited to public events etc.);

51% encountered the public discrediting of either their media outlet or its individual journalists;

49% encountered requests from representatives of state bodies to publish, alter or not publish certain information about them personally or their institution;

48% encountered verbal insults directed against journalists by government officials.



Is there government pressure when the public service publishes a report on anti-government demonstrations taking place under its window? Yes, huge...

(Public service journalist)

If someone from the government wants to gain some interest, he agrees that at the top. You can't chase every editor, every journalist. It's easier to call someone from the very top of the company. This person continues to push that thunderbolt, which is his job.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

All we hear in the newsroom is “that guy called”. We never know who “the guy” is. We only know that they called... Editors of the main news broadcasts always have a phone with them when there's a panic. You see that fear with the editor that someone will call, someone very important, if everything isn't done as it should.

(Public service journalist)

The most frequent pressure comes from staff responsible for the media, i.e. communication advisors... This government has introduced a lot of PR staff. There is a person for PR, then an assistant, then the assistant's assistant. These are often former journalists, because they know the journalists. They are expected to use their personal acquaintances.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

These forms of influence were not encountered by 22% of respondents, while 11% were not aware of them (9% did not answer these questions).

Between 40% and 45% of participants had experiences, either individually or as a group, with requests to provide special treatment to state bodies in their regular reporting, and also with the issuance of threats and blackmail.

Between 30% to 40% of respondents are aware of the remaining six forms of influence (preventing journalists from appearing at public events, requests from government officials to gain insight into reports that have yet to be published, as well as requests for media outlets to support a particular candidate during election campaigns), though requests of state bodies related to information about other actors, or information that is false or has a manipulative character, as well as the filing of charges against media outlets or individual journalists, are less present than absent.

The direct sources of control influence from state bodies are sometimes the highest government officials (ministers, mayors, senior government agency officials etc.), but in most cases they are members of the PR departments of different state bodies. The main targets of control influences are the leading figures in media outlets – directors, editors-in-chief and editors of primetime news programmes. Such control influences rarely target journalists who do not hold major editorial positions.

Government officials most commonly complain about a lack of media support for state policies. According to one journalist of a national TV company, “they criticise us by saying that we are unprofessional, that we are “yellow” [derogatory term for those allegedly favouring the opposition Democratic party bloc], that we undermine Vučić, that we don’t believe in reforms, that we are enemies”, while one respondent journalist from a

public service broadcaster notes: “they accuse us of having a biased editorial policy, of not supporting the efforts of the government and of bringing their enemies into our studio.”

State bodies request that the media more strongly promote the results of the government and its popularity, that they remain silent on controversial topics and ignore critics of the government. They consider their privileged treatment in the news as a right earned by their winning the elections, and they demand that privilege in various forms – with the publishing of favourable news and the withdrawal of negative news, by deciding for themselves on the topics of media interviews and undesirable co-speakers.

The journalists interviewed individually noted that the relationship between the current government and the media is characterised by more intense pressure exerted on the media by the government, as well as the increasingly closed nature of state bodies towards the media than was the case in the previous period.

According to one journalist from a public service broadcaster, politicians often call: “The Minister calls the editor-in-chief or the editor of Dnevnik (daily news bulletin) or the deputy editor. Or somebody from their PR department calls - you never know who they are, but they call constantly... Everybody wants to appear in Dnevnik and express their views”, but they refuse interviews, “and especially a debate with someone else”. The national TV journalist said that “it never happened that Tadić banned you from bringing Vučić into the studio. But now... They call from the Cabinet to tell you that a certain person shouldn’t be a guest in your studio.” According to one journalist from a daily newspaper, “this government has introduced the practice of not responding to journalists’ questions” and has “arrogance that the previous government didn’t have”.



There are different liaison officers from various ministries who call. Vučić's Suzana, calls for that which is more important... Nobody from the ruling parties can come as a guest without the approval of some Vladanka. Who that is - I have no idea, but everything goes through her. There are various callers.

(Public service journalist)

I think we're generally unimportant to the government. It's only important that we don't create problems. But for important things instructions are given, for example how to deal with Tomislav Nikolić's candidacy in presidential elections.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

Two days after the arrival of the new chief editor, tax inspectors arrived to check the legality of software, which had never happened before.

(Regional TV journalist)

When you get into conflict with the government, it isn't easy for even private companies to advertise with you. The government moves to send them signals, to send them inspections, so they give up. Most private advertisers work via media buying agencies, so they just call that agency to cancel the contract.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

2.2. Forms and frequency of control influences of political parties

The second most common sources of influence are the ruling political parties. Opposition parties don't have the power to influence the media and are "happy when someone comes to make some note of their activities", as one interviewed journalist said.

On average, 37% of respondents stated that they had either individual or group experience with some form of control influence from political parties, while 31% stated that they did not.

At least 40% of journalists encountered five different forms of controlling influences coming from political parties:

56% encountered expressions of dissatisfaction with the specific reporting of their media outlet, related directly in contacts with their media owner or news desk;

55% encountered refusals of representatives of political parties to provide their media outlet with information, give statements or grant interviews;

49% encountered systematic discrimination against their media outlet;

45% encountered public discrediting of either their media outlet or its individual journalists;

40% encountered requests to publish, amend, or not publish certain information about a politician personally or their political party

Journalists of national media outlets barely differentiate between sources of influence emanating from political parties and those coming from the government, as their carriers, forms and targets are mostly the same. Local media journalists, however, often encounter influences from local committees of ruling political parties, which they assess as strong.

Party influence is usually realised via journalists who are party members, and this is particularly efficient when party members hold the highest positions within media outlets. One example known to the public is the case of conditioning

employment in Radio-Television Pančevo to membership in the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) – a condition set after its privatisation in late 2015 by its editor-in-chief, who was simultaneously president of the local SNS Committee for communication.

"Party cliques" also exist in national media companies. They are created either by directly employing party members or by parties recruiting journalists among their members. There are even cases of journalists being members of several political parties.



*Opposition parties always behave wonderfully towards journalists while they are in opposition. As soon as they come to power, they change immediately... Journalists used to greatly appreciate Radicals and Socialists when they lost power, because they were a good source of information. As soon as they came to power, that changed. It worked in the same way with the Democratic Party.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*State authorities know what will be published as they have their party cliques around newsrooms - journalists close to particular parties. There are senior staff members even from Milošević's time. There are also those who join a new party as soon as it comes to power. In order to survive, they immediately connect to someone.
(Public service journalist)*

*Before SNS came to power, a group of journalists in the editorial department, in some little room, celebrated the slava of SNS, complete with roast meat, music, drinks and dancing. Without any kind of embarrassment. They later sauntered over to SNS and awaited their chance.
(Public service journalist)*

*In 2007-2008, when SNS became a party, there were two currents in the editorial department: one that maintained very close relations with the SNS leadership, and another that was loyal to DS, and which had personal and business ties with them. This were protective towards SNS a little, because that's what DS wanted at the time.
(National TV journalist)*

2.3. Forms and frequency of control influences of advertisers

Journalists most rarely encounter forms of external control influences of advertisers. This, however, does not mean that such forms of influence are uncommon or ineffective. A significant number (9%) of respondents work at media outlets that do not carry advertisements (i.e. internet portals, civil society media), and a large number of journalists in this area know little about such influences, given that they usually target media owners and management.

On average, 23% of respondent journalists had individual or group experience with some form of advertiser influence, while 27% did not.

Around a third of respondent journalists encountered the three most common forms of influence:

33% encountered the cancellation of an advertisement;

32% encountered advertisers not paying their debts towards the media company;

31% encountered requests for masked advertising (publishing marketing content in the form of regular reporting).

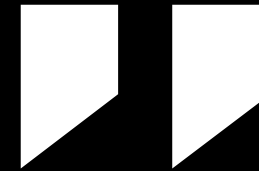
Around a quarter of those surveyed (24% to 27%) were aware of certain advertisers having requested special treatment from their media outlet in its regular coverage, and having sought that specific information relating to their company be published, not published, or amended; as well as advertisers having complained about the way a media outlet reported about their company or cancelled an advertising contract with their media outlet.

Other forms of influence were experienced by between 12% and 20% of respondents, with 13% encountering advertisers' requests for media to support a particular election campaign candidate.

Major advertisers are sometimes brutal not only in their treatment of the media as a whole, but also towards individual journalists, blacklisting those whose coverage they do not like or threatening them with negative career consequences if they continue to pursue information regarding a controversial topic.

The control power of advertisers is a generally accepted fact among journalists. They make efforts to avoid harming the interests of advertisers even without specific warnings to do so from their superiors. Contrary to their professional code of conduct, they accept the production of interviews, features or other forms of favourable presenting of advertisers, which form part of advertising contracts, as regular work assignments.

Some of those surveyed noted that advertisers sometimes exert pressure via advertising agencies, which also advocate certain political interests, as their owners are connected to government or political officials.



*Large public companies do business according to the principle - we give you adverts, you cover strikes less. You publish some news-in-brief about the strike that is swallowed among other news items.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*Major advertisers are very aggressive. When some crisis situations emerge, they increase their advertising... When you send them questions for some text that's being prepared, they say - Hey, it's actually today that we need to agree an advertising contract with you. Or they say that the information we're checking is inaccurate, launched by some foreign mercenaries, so they advise in confidence not to report on this story, because there's nothing to it. Or they give a friendly warning that those lies about them will be revealed, so any journalist who insists on pursuing them will get into trouble and become an undesirable employee... Sometimes they call to halt the publishing of some article or topic. When a journalist ignores that, they are blacklisted and no longer called to attend press conferences.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*Advertisers always threaten to pull ads if you publish something against them... According to contracts on business cooperation, we need to monitor and report on some of their events, but that boils down to them sending a finished article, and we can rearrange it in certain ways, for our journalist to then sign.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

3. Control influences on the media from internal sources

3.1. Forms and frequency of control influences of editors

The most common forms of internal control on journalists' work and media content come from editors.

On average, 36% of respondents personally experienced some form of editorial influence, while 54% did not.

The most common forms of control influence are realised during the planning of journalists' work, via two forms that are key to the media picture of reality:

47% of survey participants personally experienced an editor's refusal for a journalist to cover a proposed topic (44% did not have such an experience);

39% had experienced an editor imposing coverage of a topic without professional justification (50% did not have this experience).

Apart from the rejecting of topics, all other forms of editor influence are more commonly absent than present in the experience of respondents.

Around a third of participants encountered the three most common forms of editor intervention in journalism products already finished:

32% encountered refusal to publish a finished journalism product;

35% encountered a change in the treatment (positive or negative) of a topic or certain stakeholders in a journalism product already produced;

37% encountered a change, positive or negative, in the tone of the headline or the announcement of a journalism piece.

On the basis of the testimonies of interviewed journalists, it can be concluded that three types of relationships dominate between editors and journalists: trench warfare between journalists with strong integrity and editors, "peaceful coexistence" reflected in journalists giving up their resistance efforts, typical for highly commercial media companies, and total subservience of journalists to editors, which is most common in local media outlets lacking strong professional capacities.



*At one point, unfortunately, I no longer consider editors as colleagues and friends, but rather as enemies I'm fighting with to push my story... These are the kinds of relationships in which the editor manipulates you, you manipulate them, then you see who wins.
(Public service journalist)*

*The process is such that you submit an article and after that you have no further insight into how it is treated editorially. It is possible for something to be published under your name that you don't want. You have to fight for your every word on a daily basis. It has happened to me several times that my headlines have been changed. The text can be correct, but the entire lead block – standfirst, headline and subhead – can differ from the text. Or they will change your context in some way, weaken your criticism, add a sentence to the lead text and the article is already different.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*There are no more high-quality professional debates, people are lost in confusion... Some topics are filtered out as soon as it comes to making a plan. It is said - you know we can't do this. And all editors agree, nobody complains, no one says anything... Editors no longer worry about how the programme looks. They only work for their pay. They are so proud of what they do that they no longer sign their own names as editors.
(National television journalist)*

Most of the journalists interviewed see editors as the central figures in the control process of media content. They feel that editors, especially chief editors, are positioned between “a hammer and an anvil”, but they do not see chief editors as protectors of professional integrity, but rather as those who violate that integrity. Editors are not perceived as collaborators doing the same job, but rather as an opposing side, with different motives.

Many interviewed journalists noted that increasing pressure on the media, mostly exerted by the government, has led to the intensifying of editorial interventions in recent years, resulting in their media outlets having shifted from being close to the government to becoming pro-government media outlets, with greater politicised content, increased limits on choices of topics and reduced pluralism of opinions.

All of those interviewed stated that there were no officially forbidden topics in their media outlets.

However, the limits of what is acceptable are well known among the journalists. A tacit agreement on untouchable topics includes those that would in some way harm the government, the ruling parties, or public companies, as well as topics related to the Church, large corporations and companies to which media outlets owe money for various services. Editors do not use bans, rather various excuses to avoid covering problematic topics. According to one daily newspaper journalist, the routine practice is for an editor to say to a journalist “find a different topic”, as opposed to saying “you must not cover this topic”. An editor “never has anything against you proposing a good topic, but he also has nothing against that topic not being approved.”

Journalists gradually become more passive when it comes to confronting their editors, while their biggest problem is that they have nowhere else to go. They most commonly find a way out by dealing with thematic areas that do not attract as much pressure.



*It's one huge sack of proposals and ideas that you had and that weren't approved, and that's a very discouraging and terrible feeling.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*What is there now to look into, to say something about, when you know it will be stopped? It has been reduced to that level to function easily - we don't do that, we don't touch, we don't write and... drive on. There are no conflicts within the newsroom. There used to be more than 100 of us, now there are perhaps thirty. It's all clear to everyone what you can touch and what you can't. Inconvenient topics are always gladly ignored, wherever possible, until a really big fuss is raised... It's rare for an editor to omit something from someone's article - either they didn't deal with it, or they knew it couldn't be approved so didn't include it, or they already omitted it themselves.
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*I don't have the impression that my colleagues suffer due to the way they do their job, especially those who've been doing it for 20 years. They learned some basics of the job, going into the field, asking some questions and censoring themselves. When someone comes from the top of the government, the journalist will ask him to comment on how so many minorities have been living in peace here for decades. There isn't much resistance, perhaps only with some individuals.
(Local TV journalist)*

3.2. Forms and frequency of control influences of management

On average, 29% of participants experienced some form of influence from management, while 48% did not.

Management influence is primarily focused on protecting the economic interests of external stakeholders, though it is often applied in the service of political interests.

At least a quarter of respondents had encountered, personally or as a group, seven different forms of management influence:



Dismissing employees, which is treated here as unjustified but which does form part of the legitimate responsibilities of management, only ranks as the ninth form in order of frequency (24%), and is slightly more common than management requests to provide support to a particular candidate in an election campaign (21%).

In media outlets with strong editors or ever-present owners, management is primarily concerned with the interests of the company's business partners. In media outlets with a corporate owner who makes only strategic decisions, management is the main point of contact with both the economic and political environment, and the principal decision maker on editorial policy, with decisions then relayed to editors.



Confrontation between people from marketing and journalists is a regular thing. They get enraged when you slap someone, and that someone is an advertiser. ... You break a story, and they ask you: Well, why did you touch that, we're in advertising talks with them right now. Or they tell us: Don't touch these guys now, we're trying to make a deal with them.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

People from marketing often seek that this or that be published. But that mostly means publishing some PR text or good news about advertisers.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

Management always looks to take some money and adjusts what is published to that. For example, as part of the Belgrade Waterfront project there is some kind of promotional campaign and we are engaged in it. In order for us to get a piece of that cake, we will not say anything negative anywhere about the Belgrade Waterfront; we only praise it as a phenomenal investment... All external pressures go via senior management, not via the editorial board, and the management issues orders to the editorial board.

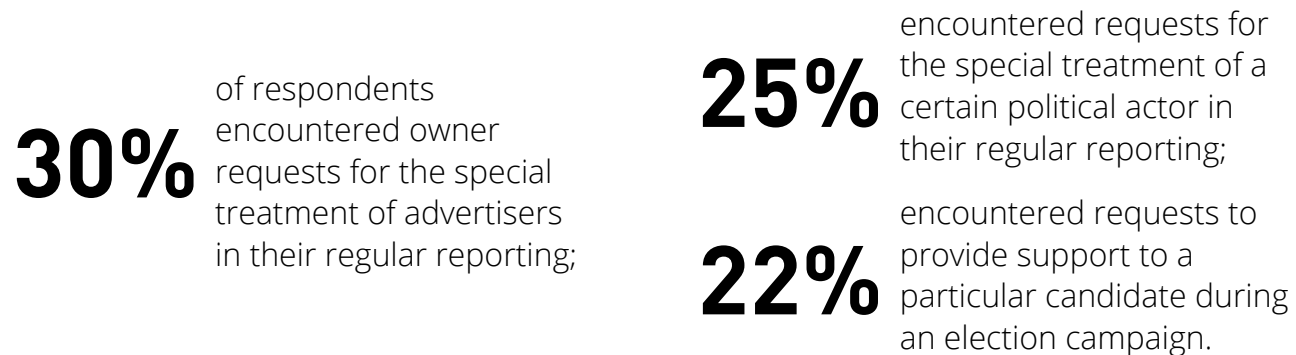
(Daily newspaper journalist)

3.3. Forms and frequency of control influences of media owners

According to the survey, owners are the least active internal source of control over journalists and news content. A possible reason for this result is the fact that the sample included 14% of participants from media outlets without private owners.

On average, 25% of respondents encountered some form of influence of the media owner on their work, while 33% did not.

Owners directly ensure the special treatment of both advertisers and certain political stakeholders:



Around a quarter of participants experienced owners interfering in activities under the authority of editors:



*Every boss of some media outlet in Serbia is the true, genuine editor-in-chief of that media outlet... Ask the chief editors of the newspapers whether those are really their frontpages. That doesn't come out of their heads... The editorial policy is such that the boss fights with it to make gains. He's interested in that. But he is primarily interested in the market functioning... As soon as the audience starts to increase, he sticks to that thing...
(Daily newspaper journalist)*

*The owner came once and never appeared again. Why would he now talk with some dust collectors? He sits down with three or four top directors and agrees with them... The owner only seeks to profit, he doesn't care about content or media freedom. He is guided according to shares. He looks at the figure and says, "I don't want this, put in something else". He has a clear financial interest and will agree with anyone who can help him achieve that interest. If he sees that advertising has fallen among public companies due to something unfavourable to the government in our news, he will immediately reach agreement with someone senior in the state, whoever that is, about how to protect his own interests.
(National TV journalist)*

Slightly less than a quarter of respondents (23%-24%) had experience with owners who perform management functions, such as replacing editors, dismissing journalists and editors, or threatening to replace or dismiss them.

Some local media outlets have owners who are not interested in media production, but there are also those who use their media outlets to protect their commercial interests in some other types of business.

Corporate owners are not interested in media content, but rather a direction of editorial policy

that will ensure profit. Editorial decisions in such media outlets are usually under the competences of the management, while occasional owner interventions are strategic and major – increased commercialisation, cancelling certain programmes, replacing chief editors etc.

There are also owners who personally interfere in news production on a daily basis, with the aim of attracting the widest possible audience and impacting business positively. Some profit from supporting the government, and others from opposing it. The autonomy of journalists is suspended in these cases.

4. Evaluation of the conditions and results of journalists' work

Most of those surveyed assessed the conditions under which journalists work negatively.

As many as 59% of respondents consider that the conditions for generating sufficient revenue on the market are unfavourable, while only 7% assessed them as favourable (21% did not answer this question, 8% do not operate on the market, and 5% don't know).

More than two thirds (68%) of respondents negatively assess the openness of the authorities towards the media, while only 10% consider the activities of the government as being sufficiently open (21% did not answer this question, while 1% don't know).

Comparing eight different aspects of the work of journalists today and five years ago, an average of 34% of respondents consider conditions worse today in all aspects, 8% think the situation is better and 23% think it is the same (24% did not answer this question, while 11% don't know).

Almost half of surveyed journalists (46%) admitted personally violating professional standards in

their work during the last year (11% often, 35% occasionally). A third (34%) claimed not to have done so at all (1% don't know, 19% did not answer this question).

When evaluating the level of independence of the media outlets where they work from external and internal political and economic pressures on a scale of one to five, participants gave a relatively high average mark – 3.4. While 20% of respondents gave their media outlets the lowest marks for independence levels (1 and 2), twice as many (42%) gave the highest marks (4 and 5).

Rating of the level of diversity of opinions in the content published by the media outlets are even more positive. The average rating is 3.6. Only 13% gave their media outlet a low rating, while 42% rated them as very good and excellent.

The surveyed journalists independently chose to highlight TV Pink, RTS and daily Informer as the media outlets that are least independent from external pressure. The highest level of independence according to respondents is found at TV N1, daily Danas, RTS and news weekly Vreme.



Owners come once or twice a year, to hand out some awards. We don't have any special contact with them. When it comes to big decisions, the management always calls the owner - for example, to go more for a tabloid variation, or when people are dismissed, because the costs of doing business must match income, or profits. But the owner's attitude is always clear – for editorial policy to yield the greatest business benefit... The only influence of the owners on editorial policy you see is that Putin is never presented positively, rather articles are preferred that present him as a threat to this or that.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

In this media the owner wasn't at all interested in what happened, he simply likes having his own television company. Journalists could represent the interests of Martians if they wanted. Freedom was complete, nothing was sought of the editorial department. The owner was interested in calling cameras to record his encounters with friends, accompanied by music.

(Regional TV journalist)

Individual aspects of work today and five years ago

% of respondents

Worse Better



The state doesn't buy us off, rather constantly threatens to close us down due to debts. You are already in deep financial arrears and they can shut you down with a click... That debt could be resolved, but it is in the interest of the state not to resolve the issue.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

Journalists agree to everything editors seek. Those few who do not agree, they are freelancers. Journalists who are in the machine, whether they are younger or older, make compromises. They know what professional standards are, but they let them slide to avoid causing a problem for themselves... The fear of losing your job has never been more significant. I have never before seen this tension, uncertainty and fear of unemployment in people.

(Public service journalist)

If television was freed, we would all go. All people stay here because they have no place to go.

(National TV journalist)

5. Evaluation of control and freedom of the media in Serbia

Three quarters of surveyed journalists (74%) assessed negatively the state of media freedom in Serbia in 2017. Half of them (50%) believe that serious obstacles exist to the practical attainment of media freedoms and the rights of journalists, while a quarter (24%) believe that in practice there are no conditions at all to attain media freedoms. Only 3% of respondents evaluate media freedom positively (1% don't know, while 22% did not answer this question).

When asked "Who is the main source of control of the media content in Serbia today?", 58% answered that it was the political establishment, while 9% said it was the owners and management jointly (22% of respondents did not answer this question, 2% don't know, and 9% answered differently).

According to 42% of participants, media outlets best serve the interests of the government, 15% think they serve particular political interests, while 9% believe they serve the interests of media owners. Only 2% think that the media work efficiently in the public interest (3% said those were special economic interests, 7% cited a combination of interests, and 22% did not answer this question).

As many as 69% of respondents think that journalists are responsible for the negative state of media freedoms in Serbia, of which 48% said they were partially responsible, and 21% said they were the most responsible. Only 4% consider that journalists are not responsible (21% did not answer this question, and 6% answered differently).



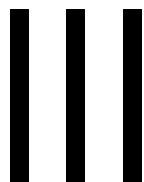
I think media freedom is today at its lowest level since 2000. The '90s were bad, but there were free media outlets, there were existing parallel worlds. Now I don't think there are any, or that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand, which is negligible. I don't think mainstream media has been as controlled as it is today.
(Public service journalist)

In the last 10 years, as long as I've been dealing with journalism, I don't think the situation has been worse.
(Minority media journalist)

There is no [media freedom]. But I don't think the government is primarily to blame. Journalists are to blame.
(Regional TV journalist)

The situation is pitiful, and everything is getting worse and worse... I think it was easier during the time of Milošević to work as a journalist than it is today, and that you had more choices and options. Today you can't go anywhere, nobody will accept you, everyone is practically destroyed... Congratulations to some colleagues, like, for instance, those at Danas.
(Daily newspaper journalist)

One big zero... Looking at what local media are like, it's pointless to talk about any freedom. This is not a local TV station. It's just a very bad SNS PR agency.
(Local TV journalist)



CONCLUSION: MECHANISMS OF MEDIA CONTROL

Based on the results of this research, several characteristics of the media sector have been identified that give power to control the work of the media to both external and internal influencers. Those characteristics are the economic unsustainability of the media and the financial dependency of the media on centres of economic and political power, an absence of legal and institutional protection of the professional autonomy of journalists from external and internal threats, the financial endangerment of journalists leading to self-censorship, and the culture of professional journalism.

Economic unsustainability of the media

The economic unsustainability of the media business, as a result of the domestic economic crisis and current technological changes, with a defective market (unregulated, non-transparent, small, impoverished, oversaturated and hypercompetitive), is reflected in a very difficult economic position of media companies that are usually on the brink of collapse.

A non-self-sustainable media industry leaves the media existentially dependent on two main sources of income – a very small number of powerful advertisers and the state establishment.

Financial dependency of the media on the government

The government manages a large portion of media finances, though its share is not known publicly. Not a single method for the distribution

of public money to the media sector is regulated precisely and conducted in a non-transparent and arbitrary way.

A clientelistic relationship exists between the government and media companies, in which the government treats media outlets as its clients, allocating financial resources to them in different ways, in return for their media support.

Absence of legal and institutional protection of journalists' autonomy from external threats

Just as there are no economic guarantees, there are also no political guarantees of journalists' independence. Even though the Law on Public Information and Media guarantees freedom of work to the journalists, and forbids censorship, discrimination, exposure to pressure, threats, blackmail and physical assault, it does not contain solutions for journalists to exercise their rights, except in the case of physical assault. The Law does not specify any sanctions for violations of other rights and freedoms, nor is there any governmental institution that protects them efficiently.

The government treats the media as its political resource and electoral gain, necessary for the realisation of its political objectives. It is not prevented from doing this by media legislation, by institutions in the media system, or by the political culture of the political elite.



Our finances are a completed construction, on glass legs. If the government wanted to pull the rug out, everything could collapse... If you have a media outlet that the government can bring down financially when it wants, not leaving a stone on a stone – you will have maximum loyalty. You try to fill the newspaper, compensating with some nonsensical topics, without interest for the public. You calculate, you have a route of indifference, you don't have itchy topics.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

The part of the revenue that is paid to the public service from the budget is the main trade in influence. Mlađan Dinkić, for example, wasn't mentioned in a negative context for years, because he withdrew budget payments to the public service on several occasions... The government today can choose not to pay you money from the budget, and it's over.

(Public service journalist)

That system has existed for a long time. The former government wouldn't give us money for advertising if we had then published a lot about it that was negative. In our political section there could be nothing negative about the DS government, just as you now can't see anything bad about the SNS government. Everything is fabulous and wonderful. We try to avoid the kind of harm they could inflict on us if they, for example, told Telekom not to advertise with us.

(Daily newspaper journalist)

Absence of legal and institutional protection of journalists' autonomy from internal threats

Domestic media regulations do not require distinction between the competences of journalists and those of company management, with the aim of protecting journalists' autonomy.

The position of editor-in-chief is a particularly weak point of the power relations within a media company, as they are the only one to carry legal – but not financial – responsibility for all media content, without having any rights that would protect themselves from the influences of company owners or management, starting from replacement. Without an independent basis of authority and being easily replaceable, an editor-in-chief is a powerless figure whose main role is to fulfil company goals and not professional ones. A special sub-mechanism of media control is in the form of politicised procedures for selecting chief editors in public service broadcasters and media outlets that are partially state-owned.

Financial endangerment of journalists

The journalist profession has long been financially underappreciated, socially unattractive, without prospects and undesirable. Fear of losing one's job and experiencing the further degradation of their already very poor economic and work status is widespread among journalists. When they succumb to pressure or engage in self-censorship, journalists tend to avoid getting into additional troubles that usually have financial consequences.

Professional journalists' culture

The dominant model of journalism is pro-state journalism (the most extreme form of which was the "patriotic journalism" during the 1990s).

Journalists here are not unbiased observers of social developments, with a developed sceptical and critical relationship towards the government, but rather the government's "constructive partners" in the joint task of maintaining stability. They consider themselves responsible for maintaining a positive image of the government and supporting its policies, rather than challenging them.

The professional culture that insisted on maintaining a distance from the government and on professional ideals of balance, credibility and diversity of opinions, which developed powerfully in the independent media during the 1990s, was subjugated due to these media outlets economic collapse.

How to achieve greater media freedom and less media control?

Analysis of the basic mechanisms of media control shows that they are deeply rooted in the structure of not only the media system, but also the political system and the dominant political cultures of the political elite, journalists and citizens.

Liberating the media from controls is possible through the engagement of all forces in society that are interested in freedom of expression, whose efforts must be directed towards efficient regulation of the use of public funds in the media sector, the activation of financial sources that would stimulate the media to work in the public interest, a change in media legislation that would establish efficient mechanisms to protect journalists' autonomy from external and internal influences, improving the economic and working conditions of journalists, and changing the professional culture in the direction of presenting journalism as a public good that serves the public.



We proposed to the editor that we do something about the suspicious business of a public company. He agreed that it was a great idea. Just 15 minutes after we emailed our questions to this public company, the chief editor knew every detail of those questions. He was called by the director of the public company and told that the things mentioned in the questions were not true. The editor-in-chief transferred our editor's decision to abandon the topic... Some of the editors are not bad people, but they are pressured from above. Everyone has their own excuse from their own perspective. Actually, you can either accept that condition or not work in that position.
(Daily newspaper journalist)

The situation is now such that you fall into disgrace in an instant... There is a great fear of losing one's job. A new workplace systematisation is being made, so many are scared. It's real psychosis.
(Daily newspaper journalist)

Finances are the most important thing. Just don't touch my salary – that's how everyone thinks. I'll endure everything, even being replaced, just leave me my salary so I can live.
(Public service journalist)

There are journalists who think the mayor should be included first, whatever he says, then afterwards must be his deputy, even if he's opening an exhibition or kicking a ball at some game. It seemed to me that they were working like that because someone was limiting them, not allowing them to stir things up. But it wasn't that they were afraid. They actually think that's the way it should be.
(Regional TV journalist)