

Ownership Irregularities in Bulgarian Private Mass Media: Implications for Freedom of Speech

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Abstract

Bulgarian private mass media experiences increasing problems with ownership. They suffer from concentration, monopolization, hidden agenda and suppression of freedom of speech. Numerous experts have discussed the tendency in their reports on the media environment in the country. This paper offers a further academic contribution to the problems, characterizing the field. In addition, the research features interviews with journalists who are directly affected by the developments in their media and a featured content analysis, based on a Foundation Media Democracy monitoring report for 2011.

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Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Media Ownership in Theory	3
1.1 Key Terms.....	3
1.2. Media Ownership Issues in Literature	5
Chapter 2: Ownership in Bulgarian Private Mass Media	11
2.1. Timeline.....	11
2.2. Political and Economic Influence	18
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	22
3.1. Literature on the Methodology	23
3.2. Validity of the Methodology.....	27
3.3. Approach to the Interviewees.....	28
Chapter 4: Implications for Freedom of Speech.....	32
4.1 Newspaper Content Analysis.....	32
4.2. Interviews with Journalists.....	35
4.2. B. Interviews Analysis.....	36
4.2. B. a) Editors and Journalists.....	36
4.2. B. b) Owners and Journalists	42
4.2. B. c) Outside Pressure on Journalists	43
4.2. C. Summary of the Analysis.....	45
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	46
Annex	48
Reference	53

Introduction

Like many other countries, Bulgaria experiences growing problems with media ownership. Breaches of the principles of fair journalism and diversity of expression have led to a decreasing score of the country's freedom indexes. *Reporters without Borders* gave the country as an example for growing pluralism issues. Although Hungary accepted an unprecedented media law,¹ which allows for direct control of the State over media, the country is still 40th, compared to Bulgaria's 80th place (*Reporters without Borders*, 2012). The country is now at the bottom of the ranking, compared with all other EU countries. *Freedom House*, on its hand, ranked Bulgaria as Partly Free, also downgrading it from previous years (*Freedom House*, 2012). It placed the country in one of the bottom three places of the European Union, together with Romania and Italy. Problems vary from conflicts of interest, through obscure financing of media to direct threats to investigative journalists. Journalists themselves are paid very low salaries and often need to "hold second jobs", according to the *Freedom House* report. In 2009, the *Open Society Institute* published a report indicating the following problems with Bulgarian media: general degradation of the media products, self-censorship, and clearer political or economic dependency (Zlatev, 2009). According to the Bulgarian affiliate of *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung - Foundation Media Democracy*, 2011 was a year of "less freedom and more conflicts." The report also features a detailed opinion on media regulation (*Foundation Media Democracy*, 2012).

This paper acknowledges the fact that Bulgarian private mass media suffers from growing ownership problems. It attempts to indicate and outline what these problems are and how they

¹ "The new law creates a media control body, with members appointed by the ruling party in parliament. All media outlets will be required to register with the body to operate lawfully" (*Human Rights Watch*, 2012)

affect freedom of speech. The work contributes to the academic and non-governmental investigations of the local media environment, through indebt analysis of the processes which occur inside different outlets. The updated overview of the issues is complemented with semi-standardized interviews with journalists working for private mass media outlets in the country. They suggest if the work process of an average Bulgarian journalist is affected by editorial pressure, based on ownership bias. This approach to the topic of media ownership issues has generally been neglected by other media analysts and has not been considered for similar works. Therefore, I propose a different and more insightful approach to the issue, and how it affects the process of free expression.

Chapter 1: Theory on Media Ownership

1.1 Key Terms

The existing problems in Bulgarian media are very much in line with the global mass media concerns. However, as we will see later in this work, the country suffers from a more intense and locally specific pressure on free journalism.

Private mass media are the media outlets, which do not feature any public funding model. Under this category, this research almost exclusively examines press and television. I would justify the omission of radio, by siding with Peter Humphreys' clarification: [...] the press and television are the main instruments of the mass media and the main agents of political communication in the modern world (Humphreys, 1996: 1). Like Humphreys himself, I would allow myself to include radio in several rare occasions, predominantly in relation to ownership conglomerate structures.

For the purposes of this paper, *media ownership* bears not only its self-explanatory meaning, but also refers to the existing theoretical frames, which scholars and experts have designed for it. Although many times this framework relates solely to media power conglomerates and concentration of ownership, here the focus includes ownership issues as a whole (including the mere identification of the owners and the source of their money). The central question is not only “how come media is concentrated in the hands of a few corporations” like it is in the USA (Free Press, 2012), but also “who owns the media” and ultimately, how this affects freedom of speech.

A central role in this research is devoted to the examination of journalism under the influence of biased owners.

Political influence and *economic influence* are differentiated with the purpose of greater clarity. Nevertheless, in the case of Bulgaria, they are actually very mixed. The patterns include political influence from the government and the major oppositional parties and economic influence from related business structures. The exact positioning between economic and political influence is clarified in the section “Mapping contemporary media ownership”.

Ownership regulation is one of the most central notions for this thesis. “The availability of accurate and up-to-date data on ownership lies at the very heart of any media pluralism regulation, as it would be impossible to take steps to address excessive media concentrations without the tool to identify them (Stolte and Smith, 2010: 3). Ownership regulation is a central point of concern in the research. In Stolte and Smith’s research, ownership regulation is regarded as the most crucial aspect of transparency and media pluralism. The researchers imply that the European Union is increasingly demanding regulation. However, the member states do not appreciate a unified binding legislature on the issue. The European Convention of Transfrontier Television (2002) is given as an example of regulatory legislation in this relation.

Diversity of opinion and *Freedom of speech* are two related notions that are observed mostly in the second half of the work. The implication to their level is going to be suggested as a consequence of the problems with media ownership regulation. The most accessible and at the same time universal definition of *freedom of speech* is the one in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the UN (1966):

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
 - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

1.2. Media Ownership Issues in Literature

Academia progressively focuses on media ownership issues. Throughout the years, scholars have consolidated behind the understanding that media, which entirely follows the demands of a free market economy, without regard to public service is harmful. The central and biggest concern is the pattern of concentration. It has been perceived as the most problematic aspect of media ownership, which also progresses irreversibly over time. A key discussant of the phenomenon is Dean Alger. In his book *Megamedia* (his way of calling media conglomerates), he outlines four categories of concern about concentration (1998: 13).

(1) unfair economic competition and distortion of market principles; (2) unfair competition the realm of information and ideas – “the marketplace of ideas” – through general dominance and elimination of competing media sources, cross-marketing, and other means; (3) deterioration of the news and public affairs materials communicated by the media; and (4) the degradation of features and entertainment shows and the consequent impact on society.

In other words, his four problems with concentrated media are: economic monopoly, idea monopoly (harming diversity of opinion), distortion of news in certain directions, and overall decrease of journalism quality. Later, Alger refers to Lee Bollinger²'s formulation on the problem: "[...] Of course, all these concerns become more serious as the number of those who control the press become fewer" (Bellinger in Alger, 1998: 153). The ideas of the two outline and systemize very well the common outcry over the tendency of increased media concentration. Alger's book also attempts to shine a light on the patterns through which media monopolies are developed. Concerning the fact that his work focuses on the US, he first points out the effect of Wall Street business on the local media giants.

The offer of public stock in the media corporations in recent years has been a major problem. This, in Alger's opinion, led to growing attention to "Wall Street's concerns; and Wall Street worries, not about quality of news, but about profitability" (1998: 154). The pattern of development of economically bound media empires includes the creation of big debts, which also affect journalism (156). In Alger's view one of the implications from the debt factor is corporate cost-cutting. Another is the intrusion of corporate owners on editorial management (157). More profound emphasis (and consequently bigger relevance to my study) on the relation between these factors and the state can be found in Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly*: "[...] corporations exert considerable influence within government precisely because they influence their audiences' perception of public life, including perceptions of politics and politicians as they appear – or do not appear – in the media" (1990: 5). As an example of the strong interdependency between news corporations and the political elite, Bagdikian refers to a letter by the

² Lee Bollinger at the time of Alger's publication was President at Michigan University. Now, he serves as President of Columbia University.

President of Hearst Corporation to Richard Nixon in 1969 (90). This case may serve as a classical instance for the undercover connection between the political elites and the media. I acknowledge the fact that since then, media ethics and law environment has been reformed significantly, but I refer to it as an instance for a particular pattern that may still be present in some situations. According to Bagdikian, the corporation demanded monopoly law exemption in exchange for a favorable attitude to the US President. The author also refers to many other examples of corporate media irregular influence on politicians.

Among the patterns of influence, we can also find media corporations funding favored candidates in the US. Specially designated political action committees, operated by the owners of the media donate money to competitors in local elections. “Candidates receiving money from a Time Inc. political committee are quite aware that they have become special beneficiaries of the media empire, whose reporting can affect their political careers” (95). Going back to Nixon’s example, the author confirms that at the end of the deal, the corporate owners “ordered their professionals to endorse for president a man who had previously attacked their constitutional freedoms but who had recently granted them a corporate favor” (100).

Two very important assumptions can be derived from this example. The first is that American mass media conglomeration implies a very definite pattern of influence. As indicated by Alger and Bandikian, the usual type of misuse of media power comes exclusively from corporate owners. They are the ones who have the exquisite ability to pressure both politicians and their own employees for the achievement of influence. The second assumption is that corporate owners have the capacity “to order” the media content in their own interest.

In order to outline how precisely media owners may hinder free and good journalism a further focus on the mechanics of inside owner-editor-journalist observation is needed. Alger mentions an example of a breach in this relation. CNN was developing an investigation, which would “cast Time in an unflattering light” (1998: 171). Eventually, CNN did not air the story, because of “Time Warner’s then-pending merger with Turner Broadcasting, parent of CNN” (Ibid.). Alger continues: “Unfortunately, this kind of behind-the-scenes look at what was not covered or was killed after material was developed is extremely rare” (Ibid.). This implies that in the process of news making, there is frequent interference from owners on ‘inconvenient’ stories.

Before focusing on the details of how owners influence news making in mass media, we need to agree that the phenomenon negatively affects democracy and freedom of speech. This is an opinion that has been shared by the majority of the well-known media researchers. One of the most respected contemporary media analysts, Robert McChesney, put it in an explicit way: “The wealthier and more powerful the media giants have become, the poorer the prospects for participatory democracy” (McChesney, 2008: 426). Although his works generally cover the US, this vision on the owners’ impact is also shared in the rest of the developed democratic world.

A much less vocal part of the media analysis sector de facto opposes the significance of the ownership problem. An illustration of the conflict between the two sides is the debate which McChesney was involved in with expert Benjamin Compaine in 2001. In contrast with the idea of power and suppression of growing media giants, Compaine claimed that “media conglomerates are not as powerful as they seem...” and that “getting bigger” needs context. Because all developed economies grow, enterprises that grow larger are often simply staying still in relative terms” (Compaine, 2001). He is one of the few authors who advocate that the notion

of a growing concern over the concentration of media is a myth creation. In his view, a free media market is actually enhancing democracy, since the owning companies are able to self-regulate in line with market principles.

However, the recent developments around Rupert Murdoch are perhaps the most apparent example of the opposite. The scandal with the British branch of his media empire escalated to unprecedented levels for the field. It resulted in the closure of the News of the World, a BSkyB takeover bid halt, and an arrest of many key figures (The Telegraph, 2012). While the scandal still continues developing and producing news updates every day, the majority of the conclusions accuse conglomeration as the key reason for its presence. The New York Times is just one of the few sources that determined Murdoch's main occupation as "Building an Empire" (The New York Times, 2012). Apparently, like any other empire, this one features undemocratic properties, like the unlawful instruments to create news. In the process of developing, this scandal shows what the potential implications from media concentration are.

McChesney and other authors' most common position is that ownership is a common problem that growingly disturbs the free media environment (McChesney, 2008). The evidence suggests that even in the US, where the majority of literature on ownership and conglomeration issues is produced, the tendency is negative. Despite the fact that a significant amount of work has been produced by academics and NGOs, still ownership issues are generally irreversible. To add to the problem, these issues may vary significantly from one state to another. If (as was mentioned above) the biggest concern in the American news environment is conglomeration of corporations and their influence on information, in other countries it might be different. I am implying that problems with ownership exist everywhere, but are changing according to the business and

political specificities of the different countries. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why the European Union has made only hesitant attempts to implement supranational regulation.

As has already been indicated, the EU commits itself to opinion diversity and freedom of speech and recognizes the problem of media concentration, but the idea to create supranational directives still stays at a ground level. Nevertheless, this indicates that the EU is no less concerned with the issues of media ownership. Compared to the US, though, it faces the abovementioned issue of specificities within the borders of all 27 countries. Mihaly Galik outlines the efforts of the European community to challenge diversity suppression from the 1970s until present (Galik, 2010). Despite the seeming institutional commitment to the problem, the EU designed an article that has been defined by Galik as a “tiny legal loophole” (2010: 237). It only gave theoretical direction to the Member States to implement media regulation, but does not give any universal direction. One of the biggest reasons for this, as indicated by Galik, is that Member States themselves oppose supranational media regulation. They generally do not question the need to protect opinion and media diversity, but are “reluctant to give up their own regulatory power on media concentration for political reasons.” The continuous effort to establish protective legislation for media diversity has resulted in the adoption of the Audiovisual Directive in 2007 and a tool, called Diversity Index. Its main purpose is to count the number of media outlets in local markets. It also measures the degree of concentration. The measurement seems to have promising goals, but Galik also presents scholars’ criticisms and insufficiencies. Let us also not forget that this is still an observational tool, which does not implement further action.

Chapter 2: Ownership in Bulgarian Private Mass Media

2.1. Timeline

It is not hard to presume that Bulgaria would have bigger issues with media ownership than the US and the older EU Member States. On the one hand, the country has smaller capital traditions, implying that the risk to fall in the American and international corporate pattern is smaller. On the other hand, it is exactly the modest free market experience that allows for even bigger breach of democratic principles than in the countries we have discussed. To add to this, academic works on Bulgarian freedom of speech, media concentration and media politics and economy have traditions that are very limited compared to those in the US. Over the years, works of media analysts have increased, which allows for contemporary investigators to get acquainted with the local media environment. The increase of academic interest in Bulgarian media ownership issues is naturally following the growing problems.

Nevertheless, both the abovementioned signals of worsening media environment and the limited existing literature suggest that further academic research is needed. As I have also mentioned before, Bulgaria has conceptually different challenges with media ownership than the ones in traditional democracies. These challenges come from its unique position of a country that is both a member of the EU and a very young post-communist democracy. However, the rest of the EU post-communist countries have less notable problems. Hungary has been part of fierce discussions and criticism, because of the already mentioned media law. Nevertheless, the majority of the countries from the former regime, who are now members of the EU, are within

the top 50 of the *Reporters without Borders* ranking. Even Romania, which has entered the union in the same year as Bulgaria, is much higher in the ranking.

Up until 1989 Bulgaria was under a one party-centered totalitarian regime, which dictated content. Even worse, the only existing newspapers were actually published and edited directly by the Central Committee of the Communist party. Until 1989 those newspapers accounted for a total number of 17 (Nikolchev, 1997). The media content was so strictly censored that even Gorbachev's *perestroika* was too brave to reflect (Nikolchev, 1997: 126). As media expert Ivan Nikolchev puts it "when *perestroika* and *glasnost* were initiated in the Soviet Union, the Bulgarian leadership refused to grant the same rights to the local media" (1997: 126). After this tightly controlled media environment, it was difficult to build free a press from scratch in the first years of Bulgarian transition to democracy. The complication was increased due to the favorable position of the former totalitarian elite. Unlike Czechoslovakia (later – the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and united Germany, Bulgaria failed to break the connections between the old and the new regime (The New York Times, 2009). Figures related to the former secret service, called during communism 'State Security', and figures related directly to the former Communist Party had the most favorable position both in politics, economics, and the developing mafia.³ In this sense, real termination of the former regime never occurred. Of course, there were positive nuances, like growing diversity of opinion and initiations for reforms, which were to a large extent occurring under the new Western influence.

³ "The Bulgarian mafia is a product of the country's totalitarian past. In Sicily, the mafia was formed when the Habsburg imperial powers withdrew and the majority of those previously employed by the army and police became unemployed. In the ensuing period, the mafia became an annex of the state. In countries such as Bulgaria or Russia, by contrast, the power of the mafia was based on the ubiquitous power of the Communist Party and its state security services" (Open Democracy, 2006) http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-europefuture/bulgaria_3825.jsp

Nonetheless, the overall impression for the most powerful economic and political structures was that they are direct inheritors of the former regime.⁴ Naturally, this could not stop from influencing the newly developing mass media in the country. The first years in which it started developing did not offer enough ground for transparency. The most widespread concern for the new outlets was the origin of money. One of the most successful publishers, Petyo Blaskov, responded to this criticism with: “from 1990 they keep asking me where I have the money from. From 1990 I keep responding that it comes from sales and advertising... what more do you need” (Sliven Dnes I Utre, 2010). This does not seem to provide a satisfactory explanation for the origin of the investment in several of the most influential newspapers in the country. When there is no transparency in the investment in media, it is natural to suspect undercover connections that might affect freedom of the press. It is media ownership that may show light on the majority of the challenges that the press has until present.

The relationship between media owners, political parties and business circles could provide sufficient information on the problems in front of the press. From that relation come disturbing mutually-fulfilling irregularities, which affect good journalism in Bulgarian media. Narrowly, the implications are in law-making and regulation, undercover political influence and bias, and hidden PR.

Undercover media outlets ownership is one of the fundamental problems of the contemporary local environment. Before anyone can indicate the scope of the current problems with private mass media ownership, they need to know who owns what. Attempts to map local outlets date

⁴ One of the clearest examples for that would be the incapability of the new governments to criminalize the breach of human rights and freedoms in the communist regime.

back to the end of the 90s. Since then, reports on the dynamics in ownership have been growing. Bulgaria has occupied sections in regional media reports, like the *South East Media Handbook 2005/2006*. The significance of these reports is very large. They not only outline the narrow issue of business relations, but also evaluate the overall media environment.

A quick overview could suggest that the Bulgarian media market has diversified enormously during the first years of democracy and right after the fall of communism. For three years (from 1990 to 1993) the number of print outlets rose to 928 newspapers and 777 magazines (Nikolchev, 1997: 128). Nevertheless, the largest attention was continuously paid to not more than three newspapers at a time. In this period, the two most powerful newspapers were explicitly party-affiliated. The first one was *Demokratsia (Democracy)*, which was the political media of the Union of Democratic Forces. The party was the quickly formed largest oppositional organization, which was targeting the Western – oriented voters. Their contrary movement was the inheritors of the Communist Party – the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which started publishing newspaper *Duma (Word)*. *Duma* was a continuation of the communist bulletin *Rabotnichesko Delo (Workers' Cause)*. The peak of the two partisan newspapers was in the very first years of the new regime. In that period people were actively involved in the events that were taking place and were very much politically charged. With the progress of time, though, the newspapers' circulation dropped from half a million each to 70,000 and 50,000 respectively (Nikolchev, 1997: 129).

The niche was overtaken by lighter and more casual tabloids. This was the first indicated tendency for commercializing of the local media. Also, for the first time it was very clearly suggested that the new 'media elite' was strongly affiliated with the past apparatus. The most

successful ones were yet again linked with the former regime. *24 Chasa* (24 Hours) and *Trud* (Labor) were initially published by journalists from *Rabotnichesko Delo* and the communist labor organizations media. *24 Chasa* was owned by a press group called *168 Chasa Press Group* and *Trud* was published by *Media Holding*, which privatized the labor unions' publishing house. As early as 1997 their money source was suspicious to media experts like Nikolchev (1997: 131). It became even more disturbing when the two large media groups were joined under the umbrella of the single foreign newspaper investor Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ). The deal was closely examined by media analyst Velislava Popova. The German press group entered the market in 1996 with an investment, amounting to little more than 50 million Euro. Their first purchase was the *168 Chasa Press Group*, and the second was *Media Holding*, which at the end of the 90s was already experiencing financial difficulties. WAZ was gradually involved in schemes for monopolization of the print media market. Firstly, they offered joint deals to advertisers for their two most popular newspapers. This automatically put them into a much more favorable position than any other newspaper (Popova, 2006: 108).

Unfortunately, this tendency has not been reversed much consequently. The next move that enabled WAZ to cartelize the market was to acquire the largest publishing houses and distributing agencies (Ibid). This was considered as a step towards closing the chain of the media market. Although the then government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was quite reluctant to see such a growing media beast, they could not succeed in imposing the legislative restrictions on the corporation. For example, there were numerous lawsuits between the group and the Competition Protection Commission, but they were gradually won by the first (Popova, 2006). Therefore, WAZ acquired a powerful position in the local public sphere – the largest newspaper publisher, who was criticizing the government. Popova also suggests that the

decreased trust in the government of the UDF is a direct consequence from the negative campaign that WAZ triggered against them in the newspapers. This followed the government's gradual attempts to protect competition.

There were several other powerful newspaper groups in the country. Offshore company MSG Holding acquired newspaper Standart. The company was owned by Russian oligarch, Michael Corni, who was expelled from the government of UDF in the year 2000 for threatening national security (Popova, 2006: 110). Before that, Corni also acquired one of the two largest and most popular football clubs – Levski, which is still officially in possession of his Bulgarian lawyer Todor Batkov. Batkov acted as a representative of Mr. Corni to Bulgaria for the period after the businessman's expulsion. He still possesses the majority of the shares in *Standart Daily*.

The remaining space in the market of popular newspapers was filled by dailies and weeklies with dubious image and insignificant influence on the general public. Daily Monitor was a newspaper developed by the owner who sold *168 Chasa Press Group* to WAZ – Mr. Petyo Blaskov. He undertook Monitor just after he sold his previous project. The model was again tabloid, and in order to increase the circulation, it started offering lottery games for expensive cars to its readers. The same model was later used by other media too. Capital Weekly and Dnevnik Daily are two newspaper owned by Ivo Prokopiev, who initially received financial aid from Reuters. The outlets are business oriented and are considered close to Western associations and non-governmental organizations, related to Open Society. Mr. Prokopiev also owns a large portfolio of other businesses, which as we can see later, often affects the objectivity in the outlets.

Throughout the years, the owners of the major newspapers had gradually oriented themselves towards a comforting zone within the political and economic spectrum in the country. Most of

them abused the weak legislative system, in order to survive and expand. For example, WAZ dispersed their shares among ‘friends’ companies’ in order to cover up their monopoly status (2006: 108-109). Others were outdated and forced to shut down.⁵

For the last 10 years there have been three radical changes in the political elite of the country. In 2001 the former Bulgarian king, Simeon Saxe-Kobourgh Ghatta, returned to the country and formed a party, which won against the UDF. His formation was centrist, balancing between Western, local and Russian influence. During that government, Bulgarian joined NATO and received a date for joining the EU. The next government, which was formed in 2005, included three coalition parties: the former communists (*BSP*), Simeon’s party and the Turkish minority party, which is generally perceived as connected to the former State Security. The end of their term was marked by increasing public discontent, which led to their consequent elections loss. In 2009 the new government was led by Boyko Borisov, current prime-minister, often associated with the underground world and organized crime. His party GERB⁶ (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) is compound of a mixed audience. The profile is right conservative, but there are many former affiliates to the regime. The government has been accused by the opposition of manipulating the local elections in October (The Sofia Echo, 2011).

In the context of the changing powers in Bulgarian governance and the ongoing economic crisis in the continent and the region, Bulgarian press had to adjust to the environment to survive. A report on Bulgarian media and the financial crisis by the Soros Foundation states that “a dramatic

⁵ Former party newspaper *Demokratsia* gradually lost its legitimacy by the end of the term of the government of UDF. It closed in 2002, only a year after the end of the term.

⁶ GERB is also a word game, since the word means ‘coat of arms’

drop in the advertising revenue is visible, especially in the traditional media” (Zlatev, 2009). The observant for Bulgaria, Ognian Zlatev, indicates several negative trends in media for the time: general degradation of media products, self-censorship and clearer political or economic dependency. He also indicates that mainstream media is reluctant to invest in investigative reporting, shrinks budgets, salaries and positions and becomes increasingly dependent on the influence of state institutions.

To sum up, the transitional period for Bulgarian mass media, and particularly newspapers, have been subject to too many and different challenges. The first challenge was how to establish a non-corrupted business environment. Evidence suggests that the process of initial investment in Bulgarian media was predominantly subject to obscurity. Consequently, the market became too isolated from any type of regulation, which can also be explained with its radical and rushed liberalization after the censoring totalitarian regime. This resulted in the establishment of convenient mechanism for concentration in ownership. The overall impression from the environment in Bulgarian media and politics is that they gradually found an unhealthy common living space. In this space, the media is not too challenging to the governments and the governments are not too careful about market regulation. This leads to general degradation of the quality of local outlets.

2.2. Political and Economic Influence

The evaluation, provided by the Soros Foundation, closely preceded some groundbreaking changes in the media environment of the country. Almost all of the most influential mainstream newspapers changed ownership in the last two years. The most significant deal was the withdrawal of German corporation WAZ from the market in December 2010. It is even more

interesting who they sold their possessions to. The newspapers 24 Chasa, 168 Chasa, Trud, one printing house and one distributing agency, were acquired by former banker, Lyubomir Pavlov, and the owner of numerous companies, including the biggest pharmaceuticals producer Sopharma, Ognyan Donev. The shift was arguably in the direction of re-nationalization of the media group. One exception was that it also involved the Austrian crown heir, Karl Habsburg. A few months later, though, Hristo Grozev, who worked with Habsburg, complained that the Bulgarian businessmen acquired a larger share in the ownership, without his concession. A court appeal followed. On the first instance, it granted right to Grozev to participate in the project, but on the second instance he was refused (Dnevnik, 2011). This follow-up left big concerns that the newspapers will be controlled solely by a team which is connected with the government. For example Pavlov later became the president of the Union of the Publishers (Dnevnik, 2011 (2)). In his first interview, he suggested that the state has to control the newspaper distribution market (Dnevnik, 2011 (3)).

A more significant change in the press market was the centralization of ownership in one relatively new group – New Bulgarian Media Group. Founded in 2007, the Group is gradually acquiring larger shares of the market, reaching a current circulation of 180, 000 to 220, 000 (see NBMBG website). There are allegations that the same group owns a few other publications, but hides it. NBMG also controls two of the largest terrestrial television channels TV7 and bTV and one cable TV channel - BBT. The owner of the group is Irena Krusteva, who was CEO of the state-owned lottery company between 2002 and 2005. She was fired because of accusations for ambiguous property deals with private companies. Her son, Deyan Peevski, was deputy minister

in the parliamentary group of the Movements for Rights and Freedom⁷ in the previous government. Mr. Peevski is currently a parliament member from the same party, which is officially opposing the government.

Nevertheless, the newspapers NBMG possesses are affiliated both qualitatively and quantitatively with the governing party GERB. For example, the majority of their deals is financed through Corporate Trade Bank, which is in possession of 70% of the assets of the state-owned companies of the Ministry of Economy in Bulgaria (Dnevnik, 2011 (4)). The bank possesses the assets of other state-owned companies, as well. The CEO of the same bank, Tsvetan Vassilev, admitted that is linked to one of the media group's televisions – TV7, but refused to be associated with the other media. Nevertheless, all of the media that are under the umbrella of New Bulgarian Media Group and Corporate Trade Bank are exceptionally favorable to the current government. A media monitoring analysis of Foundation Media Democracy highlighted that the “group of Delyan Peevski” was favoring three major parties - GERB, BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) and MRF (Foundation Media Democracy, 2012). In the Foundation's report it is suggested that the leading line is to legitimize GERB as the major governing party and BSP and MRF as the only alternative to the government.

The Economist's comment on the last municipal and president elections in Bulgaria (which were held in October) was “More of the same please” (The Economist, 2011). “Bulgaria's local and presidential elections have given a thumbs-up to the status quo,” wrote the Economist. However, many argue that this is to a great extent aided by the press, owned or affiliated to the New Bulgarian Media Group. This situation was particularly unfavorable to third party members or

⁷ the former communist State Security –related party, which represents the Turkish minority in the parliament

independent candidates. Independent candidate for President, Meglena Kuneva, was not even invited to one of the debates on TV7, no matter that in the beginning of the campaign she had equal chances to win like the candidates from GERB and BSP. Nevertheless, the eventually elected candidate from GERB, Rosen Plevneliev, and his run-off from BSP, Ivaylo Kalfin, were presented by the television as the main (if not the only) runners for the position from the start. Kuneva later accused the media, owned by New Bulgarian Media Group of leading a systematic anti-campaign against her⁸. Observing Foundation's Friedrich Naumann was even more direct: "Prime Minister Borisov mobilized a big part of New Bulgarian Media Group against Kuneva" (Deutsche Welle, 2011). The analysis continues with "the whole press, state, private television and radio are dependent on the government. This occurs either through the ownership structures or via the owners who have their own interest to inform in favor of the governors" (Ibid.).

We can confidently conclude that the processes in Bulgarian mass media are increasingly leading to concentration, rather than diversification of the outlets. This suggests that the environment has not achieved a quality market reform, after the collapse of the totalitarian regime. Much worse, democratization in the sphere of journalism in Bulgaria, was ill-performed and unsuccessful and continues to be subject to the implications from non-regulation of the market.

⁸ She also referred to headlines on their front pages, which were attacking her.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I propose a descriptive and qualitative analysis of the ownership environment in Bulgarian private mass media. Mapping the owners is one of the most essential tools for grasping the problem in the country. The relation between the current ownership dynamics and the orientation of the outlets towards particular political organizations and persons has been qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed by the Foundation Media Democracy (2012). The organization has been active since 2007. Their annual report from 2011 feature monitoring reports, based on 24 249 items in seven news outlets. The reported tendencies derive from a comparative research with the previous year's similar indexes. The analysis of the data provided allows for the indication of tendencies, such as the significance of negative media campaigns.

In addition to the examination of the report, I also propose qualitative analysis of interviews taken from Bulgarian journalists. The main goal of interviewing journalists in a random selection from different mass media in Bulgaria is to indicate the presence of influence on their work. The method seeks to outline the immediate inside effect of ownership issues on the routine of the average journalists. Some scholars would choose to interview analysts, experts, or activists for freedom of speech. However, this could bias the research excessively. Moreover, their opinion is already publicly expressed in reports and articles predominantly by nongovernmental organizations. The purpose of this research is different – to outline the inside editorial implication of ownership issues in media. Compared to the existing academic research on media ownership issues, this approach may be innovative and far more illustrative.

3.1. Literature on the Methodology

The most popular literature, concerning media ownership issues and media concentration do feature significant relevance to the occurrences inside the media. Authors prefer to focus more on mapping ownership and providing with general information about the environment. For example, Velislava Popova's contribution to the collection "Media Ownership and its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism" (in Petkovic (Ed.), 2004) in Eastern Europe focuses narrowly on legislation, privatization, ownership structures, etc. This is the pattern in the majority of the analyses about media ownership in general. Moreover, Petkovic emphasizes a very notable deficit in the academic approach to the problem. In the preface, she notes that the media market is so dynamic that at the end, the reports "will inevitably be out-of date at the time of publication" (Petkovic, 2004), something that is a very valid concern to each examiner of ownership issues. Petkovic points out that the general patterns will remain similar, which is a way out from the expiring actuality, but yet does not seem sufficient.

Additionally, the reports on media ownership issues provide with too descriptive analysis, which usually do not go beyond the information, which the reader may find by him/herself with some research. A good example for this trend is the South East Europe Media Handbook 2005/2006 (2006). It features collections of encyclopedic information about the countries' media environment. One can find very complete knowledge about the local media issues, but still without comprehending the depth of the problems. For example, Zlatev's contribution to the handbook (Zlatev in Vujovic (Ed.), 2006) features information about Bulgaria's history, geography, economics, then gradually entering in the media landscape and ownership, and

finishing with issues of ethics, hate speech and freedom. Being very descriptive, the research does not go beyond the reported evidence of pressure on journalists. Also, there is no logical connection between one phenomenon and the other – the issue of ownership concentration is not reflecting on limited freedom of speech. All these phenomena are considered separate and independent issues, which complement a common picture for the media environment.

A narrower focus on the relationship between media ownership and freedom of speech is achieved predominantly in the methodology of qualitative works such as McChesney's *Rich Media Poor Democracy* (McChesney, 2000). In this case, the author is de facto making a statement not about freedom of expression of journalists, but more about the implication of concentration on democracy. He argues that "the media have become a significant *anti-democratic* force in the United States and, to varying degrees, worldwide" (McChesney, 2000: 2). However, being an egalitarian, McChesney seeks the answer to the problem not within the properties of the journalism profession inside the increasingly commercializing media, but rather in the structure of the businesses as a whole. He poses ongoing conceptual question such as "the privileges" of the rich, the imbalances of power, etc. Also, McChesney discusses the processes, which occupy contemporary media in the context of the classical notion of democracy "the rule of the many" (p. 5). His proposition in that context is "reducing social inequality and establishing a media system that serves the entire population and that promotes democratic rule" (Ibid).

Throughout these ideas and tendencies, we can often notice short references to indicators of freedom of expression, such as: "The rise to dominance of the global commercial media system is more than an economic matter; it also has clear implications for media content, politics, and

culture.” (McChesney, 2000: 79). These ideas indicate the limitations that freedom of expression meets in the context of ownership issues. However, they are more appropriate for the conceptualization of the ideas, than understanding the mechanisms of imposing limits to journalism.

A clearer concept of news manipulation in concentrated media is developed in the section “Internal Distortions” in the book “Media Concentration and Democracy. Why ownership Matters” by Edwin Baker (2007: 40). Here we can see a suggested relationship between the amount of media concentration and the journalists’ inability to work freely. The assumption comes from the suggestion notion that as a rule, editors are not supposed to let journalists write “against” the corporate owners. There are two main findings, which indicate the presence of inside editorial restrictions on journalists, based on ownership status.

Conglomerate ownership automatically, structurally moves the firm away from an ideal of where its economic incentives align with the media’s proper mandate to serve its public audience. (Baker, 2007: 40)

And:

... Conglomerate ownership structurally creates economic vulnerability to outside pressure and creates internal incentives to trade journalistic integrity for the conglomerate’s other economic interests (Baker, 2007: 41).

In other words, Baker is one of the few media analysts, who are capable of encompassing the exact relation between improper media ownership and limitations to freedom of speech. However, what I find essential for the building of the complete picture of ownership issues, as a method, is designing a qualitative research, which would hint how the technical pattern of

accomplishment of ownership pressure. In all the other cases, we can be informed in detail, but to an extent superficially about the processes that take place in media.

In general, the focus in the academic works, which are occupied with media ownership issues, do not pay too much attention to what precisely occurs inside the editorial rooms and between editors and journalists. As in Dean Alger's *Megamedia* - "the press", "the media" can "distort", can "fuel ignorance", etc. (Alger, 1998: 153). However, how is all of this achieved? Is there a measure, through which we can indicate it? Who are the ones who technically manipulate news? Who are the responsible ones? What role do the owners play in the process? What is the role of editors and journalists? These are all questions that need to be cleared, in order to achieve a complete notion on the extent and the specificity of the problem. This is why this research proposes interviews with the journalists in Bulgarian private mass media.

One can never be explicit enough when explaining the advantages of interviewing for an academic work. However, as Ritchie and Spenser put it: "The last two decades have seen a notable growth in the use of qualitative methods for applied social policy research. Qualitative research is now used to explore and understand a diversity of social and public policy issues..." (Ritchie, Spenser, 2002: 305). The end goals of analyzing qualitative data, in their point of view are: "defining concepts: understanding internal structures; Mapping the range, nature and dynamics of phenomena; Creating typologies: categorizing different types of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, etc.; Seeking explanations: explicit or implicit; Developing new ideas, theories or strategies." (Ritchie, Spenser, 2002: 309).

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research, interviewing is regarded as the best way to get acquainted with the specificities of ownership issues for the everyday work of journalists. This would probably fit into the concept of understanding internal structures and mapping the range nature and dynamics of the phenomena. In both cases, the research would not contribute more than the already conducted, if it has not featured such qualitative analysis. Still, there might be a conflicting point, arguing that ownership issues in media would not need qualitative analysis, because of the issue of validity. Many would suggest the use of other methods for this work, like network analysis or self-conducted content analysis. However, both network analysis and content analysis have already been in place when other analysts researched the media environment in the country. I do not believe that I have the resource to produce a more in-depth work than theirs. I rather approach the issue from a perspective that has not been present in a wide range of literature on the topic.

3.2. Validity of the Methodology

As for validity, Joseph Maxwell has conceptualized it very well in his work “Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research” (in Huberman and Miles (eds.), 2002: 45). Firstly, the qualitative research has descriptive validity. In his words, it both features what the researcher directly experienced (Ibid.) and what was inferred from other data. The latter is being defined by Maxwell as secondary descriptive validity. The author also presents the concept of interpretative validity (Maxwell, 2002: 48), which the embodiment of the perspective of the interviewees, or “the participants’ perspective”, as he puts it. It suggests that within the analysis, the validity is achieved not from the point of view of the researcher, but the one of the subjects of analysis.

“Interpretative validity does not apply only to the conscious concepts of participants; it can also pertain to the unconscious intentions, beliefs, concepts and values of these participants...” (Maxwell, 2002: 50). The last two justifications of qualitative methods, are presented as Theoretical Validity (Ibid.) and Evaluative Validity (55). Theoretical validity “refers to an account’s validity as a theory of some phenomenon” (56). Here Maxwell provides with a very colorful juxtaposition between the three.

“For example, one could label the student’s throwing of the eraser as an act of resistance, and connect this act to the repressive behavior or values of the teacher, the social structure of the school, and class relationships in U.S. society. The identification of the throwing as “resistance” constitutes the postulation of a theoretical construct to the descriptive and interpretative understanding of the action; the connection of this to other aspects of the participants, the school or the community constitutes the postulation of theoretical relationships among these constructs”.

The last validity – the evaluative validity – is the occupation of the researcher to evaluate whether the throwing of the eraser was justifiable and a correct action (55). As Maxwell argues, this is a notion for the qualitative analysis that is least significant. Also, it is relatively independent from the others, since it is at the discretion of the author. In the context of the current research, the validity of the qualitative analysis is predominantly descriptive and evaluative. It features the point of view of the author, aligned with the evidence, suggested by the interviewees.

3.3. Approach to the Interviewees

The journalists that I have questioned are to remain anonymous. Anonymity and proximity are the two guarantors for the most open and sincere answers I could extract from them. Anonymity

is promised for the sake of complete security that even if this research becomes public and popular, it will not affect their employment. Proximity is represented in the direct contact with them. I have preferred to ask my questions in person with a recorder, rather than sent via email, because I believe that they would feel more predisposed to give away personal information in this way. Also, I have been worried that their availability online was through their work email addresses, which is an additional impediment to their openness. The questions are semi-standardized. I believe that in this way I achieve two main results, which are valuable for this research. The first is that I am seeking freedom in the answers of the journalists. This would allow for further information to be introduced during the research – some of which is over the expectations. The standardization of the questions allows finding tendencies, based on similarity of the replies.

The rationale behind the design of the questions lies on a conceptualization of the potential problems that an editorial room would meet in a partly free media. The first problem is that editors tolerate journalists' bias towards issues, political parties, companies or persons. The second is that editors restrict journalists who attempt to investigate issues, concerning the abovementioned parties. Both are assumed to be exceptionally true for media that are subject to intense conflict of interest, due to their ownership. The same is valid for my third assumption – that the media would seek the investigation of concrete actors, because they are part of a competition. Therefore, there would be patterns of investigation for the sake of harm.

The next assumption is that media, which is affected by ownership irregularities, would undermine certain political actors and would more intensively cover others. The last two

assumptions are that the media would tolerate the positive coverage of events via undercover sponsorship and that some journalism pieces would be frequently called off due to certain conflicts. The abovementioned issues are concerning exclusively the relationship between editors and reporters. The editors in different mass media are considered to be the direct linkage between journalists and the owners of the media. Therefore the above section deals exclusively with the interaction of the interviewees with their immediate supervision.

The next segment of assumptions is related closer to pressure coming from the formal employment issues in different media. The first among them is that the salaries that the journalists receive are low. They are assumed to be insufficient for the survival of the average journalist if they are not combining two or more jobs at the same time or if they do not have expenses covered by other sides. This assumption leads to the common notion that the professional self-confidence of Bulgarian journalists is intentionally suppressed. This limits the space of action and relative liberty for an average journalist. The second assumption is that media mergers or merely the economic crisis, have led to the optimization of the expenses in media. Naturally, this calls for the dismissal of many journalists in the recent media. This leads to the fourth assumption that there is very big insecurity inside newspaper and TV rooms, which is a limitation to the freedom of expression of journalists.

The subsequent set of assumptions is based on the notion that journalists are subject to additional pressure, which triggers even bigger implications to the possible area of their performance. The outside factors that I have indicated are predominantly associated with politicians and their attitudes to journalists. In the majority of the cases editors are considered contributive to outside

pressure on journalists, because they are responsive to the demands of the politicians. This is again present in cases when the owners have particular binds with the politicians. The points of concern are whether politicians have the space to restrict certain publications or story coverage. In most of the cases, this may be evident by having frequent calls and expressed discontent by the politicians on specific stories. Politicians or other interviewees are aggressive and look down on reporters. Sometimes they harass or treat the reporters as underdogs. They may also threaten or tempt journalists for the accomplishment of their own interest. All of the above are assumptions that I have addressed in the questions that I will further present.

Chapter 4: Implications for Freedom of Speech

4.1 Newspaper Content Analysis

The developments in the ownership in Bulgarian private mass media over the years suggest that the environment is subject to significant influence on opinion diversity. To outline the narrow pattern of this tendency, analysts need to systemize the connection between ownership irregularities and freedom of speech. One way to achieve this is through the examination of the content in the mass media. A thorough content analysis may indicate patterns in the development of the attitude towards particular individuals or political parties. One of the problems that have been indicated in the Foundation Media Democracy report for the past year is paid political campaigning before elections (Lozanov in Foundation Media Democracy Report, 2012: 12). Lozanov, who is the Chair of the local Council for Electronic Media, commented that this practice is still widespread, since there are no legal provisions for political advertising. This allowed for different media to depreciate the value of political debate to a completely commercial, but yet not officially commercial base. “The result is that almost the entire 2011 election campaign in the media was paid for by the political parties, a practice, which is essentially similar to vote buying (which has been a big issue in Bulgarian elections)” (Lozanov in the Foundation Media Democracy Report, 2012: 12). From this observation, we may easily infer that the political parties and the owners of the mass media in Bulgaria have established a conjunction, which automatically excludes the possibility for consumers’ accountability. Instead, the media become “something like campaign ‘broadcast channels” (Ibid.).

A very thorough observation on the implications to freedom of speech may be inferred from the annual report of Foundation Media Democracy's Index on seven national daily newspapers. The 2011 report is entitled "Less Freedom, More Conflicts: 2011". The monitoring tracks the "Attitude towards Politicians and Institutions in the Bulgarian Press in 2011" (Spasov in FMD Report, 2012: 24). In fact, the report's observation does not explicitly suggest a particular pattern of breach to freedom of speech. What it mainly does is an indication for a worrisome concentration of media attention on one political figure and on one party.

First, in the context of large-scale crisis of media confidence in parliament, in parties and in other key institutions, media approval is concentrating more or less in a single direction: on the figure of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (Spasov in FMD Report, 2012: 30).

Although the report finds a slight reduction in positivity towards the party in power and the Prime Minister, in comparison with 2010, "the trend" is still in the direction of their exclusive media attention. In fact, the exclusivity of the Prime Minister based on relative terms to his competition is now even bigger and "in 2011 in the Bulgarian press there was a limited, formal media pluralism based on serious imbalances" (Ibid.). The concentration of attention around a specific political figure, which happens to be the Prime Minister of the country, poses serious questions on the availability of pluralism in the context of the local media environment.

To add to the bias to the particular individual, the report also suggests something that I interpret as a media coverage cartel between GERB (the party in power) and BSP (The Bulgarian Socialist Party, which is its main rival in opposition). In Spasov's words, the two parties have achieved "certain media parity" (Spasov in FMD Report: 2012: 31). The implication to democracy is the limited opportunity for the appearance of "smaller, newer, or less traditional political formations" (Ibid). For bigger clarity, unlike the United States, Bulgaria features a

proportional electoral system, which is supposed to be more favorable to the representation of smaller political parties (Tzenova, 2004: 144). The biggest implication of this phenomenon is the drastic drop of positivity towards the third popular candidate for Presidential elections in 2011 – Meglena Kuneva. Despite her previous positive image, by October the negative items towards her were about twice as many as the positive ones. By December, they were a whole 7.5 times more than the positive (Spasov in FMD Report: 2012: 30). Spasov's assumption is that this is a result of "massive campaign against her in the media" (Ibid), triggered by her declaration for remaining in politics after the presidential elections. This finding and assumption naturally leads to the opinion that Bulgarian media can easily be set to a common agenda.

The last conclusion, proposed by Spasov, is that Bulgarian journalists work more like bureaucrats, than free professionals. This, in his words, is not due so much to the outside factors, which are independent from the management of the media, but rather on pressure from political and economic dependencies (Spasov in FMD Report, 2012: 31).

Bulgarian media environment, as presented in the comparative report for 2010 and 2011 from Foundation Media Democracy suggests significant influence on the work of journalists. Although from the analyzed media content, it cannot be concluded in what particular pattern this effect is achieved, we can assume that owners establish a guideline, which is overall corrupted. Concentration of media attention, consolidation of coverage between two exclusive political parties, and the pressure on journalists, are all described as "trends" that characterize the field in the country. This analysis is motivational for further examination of the media environment in the country.

For the purposes of completing the work on the contemporary media problems in Bulgaria, one may enhance the proposed research with content analysis of television and radio and possibly network analysis, which could map clearly the interdependencies in media ownership. However, this research focuses more thoroughly on the de facto patterns of influence on the local journalists. Therefore, the subsequent section offers qualitative research in the form of interviews with anonymous journalists, who indicate the presence of the factors, which we have already discussed here.

4.2. Interviews with Journalists

I conducted six fully recorded and face to face interviews with journalists. Their length was between 9 minutes and 18 seconds and 37 minutes and 55 seconds, depending on the depth of their answers. The interviews were conducted in locations which were comfortable for the participants. There were three interviews in parks close to their workplaces, one in a night club, which was the second job location of the participant, and two at their homes. The locations were independent and safe and were determined both by me and by the respondents, since the specificity of the questions required complete secrecy from their editors and employers. The format was semi standardized. The profile of the journalists, who are to remain anonymous for ethical purposes, is as wide as the scope and time allowed. They are both male and female and between the age of early twenties and mid-thirties. As I have explained earlier, I was interested in particular set of questions, which were systemized according to wider topics. These I define as categories and questions, which can be found in the Annex.

4.2. B. Interviews Analysis

4.2. B. a) Editors and Journalists

Conducting interviews on the topic of ownership irregularities can be challenging in Bulgaria. Some of the journalists from Bulgarian private mass media were not willing to comment on the issues I have raised in front of them. Despite the fact that I have assured them that they would remain anonymous, about half of the people that I attempted to contact were not willing to participate in the project. This is an indication for an existing pressure on them. The first issue that is worth pointing out was the presence of a particular undercover agenda in the different outlets. There is an apparent bias in some of the editions to the ruling party, and part of this tendency is explicable with opportunistic behavior of the media's owners. Two of the journalists formulated this position, but excluded their own media. Journalist A: "In general parties with lesser weight are neglected in Bulgarian media." While this might seem a logical phenomenon, journalist B went further:

Nevertheless, there is a tendency in Bulgaria absolutely always to cover events related to the party in office, meaning whatever the Prime Minister does, he goes to meet someone; all the media are there, the President goes to a business breakfast with Greek business people, all the media are again there. The Minister of Interior, who is for an unknown reason a very powerful figure in Bulgaria, is again covered wherever he is. This is politics of the media and is put forward in such a way that if you do not have these events in your news, your news is not up to date.

This agenda directly influences the work of journalists, employed in the media. Editors interfere in the materials and often without explanation remove produced content. "One of my stories has been removed, because it was against an idea of the party in power," said reporter X. He added: "They (referring to the editors) are very careful to keep the best quality for Boyko (referring to Boyko Borisov, current Prime Minister) and GERB (The party in power, abbreviated from

Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria). Editors come more often and check things many times. There is a horrible panic when the story is about Boyko,” claims Z, who is a montage expert in the same television. He implies that the editors are feeling too nervous and scared not to confuse something when they have to air a story about the ruling party. Favoring a particular political organization automatically results in negative attitude to others. “There are moments in which there is a drive for the outage of someone as “bad,” says H, who works for a right wing newspaper. Even further go the confessions of X and Z, who work in one television together. X: “We have made stories aiming specifically against the former president Parvanov. Also very often they are against Ivan Kostov” (Bulgarian PM 1997-2001). And even more disturbing: “We are warned that we would be fired if we show his face in a story. This an unofficial rule.” X added the following:

We have recently made an interview that was ordered by the boss, in which he expected to hear one sentence that Ivan Kostov needs to resign from politics. For sure the interview was put out of its context in order to fulfill what the boss wanted to hear.

His colleague confirmed that “there are people who are not welcome in the television”. He was almost fired, because he did not cut out recorded criticism of the current government. The abovementioned instances not only show a big bias in Bulgarian media towards one person or another. Bias is not an easily avoidable phenomenon in media worldwide. What is more important is that they indicate intense manipulation of the news for the achievement of a particular agenda. In many cases, the interviewed reporters experience difficulties to grasp the requirements and limitations they have in the beginning of their work. Consequently, they start to realize what they are supposed to say and what – not. Z confirmed: “When I started in the first month I understood the whole censorship, who hates whom, what goals they have, and it even felt funny and it looks a bit like a kid’s game, a bit funny.”

It is even harder for the employees in Bulgarian media, which combine political interests, based on the specificities of the outlets' ownership and corporate interest. Naturally, corporate ownership is one of the most criticized aspects of contemporary tendencies in media ownership. Despite the fact that the corporate element is much less significant in Bulgaria, than in the United States, several news outlets officially or semi-officially belong to company conglomerates with a big value to Bulgarian economy. An example of this is the TV channel Bulgaria on Air, which is part of the Eastern Bulgarian holding TIM. As a journalist from this media put it:

In this holding there is a bank, airline company, pharmaceuticals industry, maritime shipping, river shipping, against these institution you cannot make reports. They are “our people”. This is openly stated, you have to be insane to go and make a report against the banks. I mean, if there is a problem, it is solved inside the holding.

A similar situation is suggested by an employee of Economedia, co-owned by Ivo Prokopiev, who is also owner of numerous other enterprises (See Prokopiev website). Among them is the mining company Kaolin, which has recently been subject to criticism by many organizations. A comment by one of the journalists in his media suggests a disturbing discrepancy between the information in other media and the one that is controlled by Prokopiev:

In all the rest of the media there is news how Kaolin is polluting [the nearby] village, how [...] cyanide in the water led to increased leukemia, etc. Naturally, the story in the newspaper was exactly the opposite.

While the tendency for different media to protect their own political or corporate affiliates may seem to be more or less universally logical, some Bulgarian media perform an action that is even more disturbing. Only one journalist out of the whole sample did not confirm that there are undercover paid messages in his workplace. The rest of them gave instances of both political and corporate financing for the execution of the so-called “undercover PR” or “undercover

advertising”. The most striking example of political undercover messaging is executed by the government’s institutions. The scheme that has been suggested by two particular journalists from two separate media involves the execution of contracts for positive coverage of events, related to ministries. The managers in the media accept money for carefully designed stories about the institutions. The journalists, working for these media were willing to tell how they were involved in the making of such stories on a regular basis.

They also suggest in what way exactly the ministries pay for coverage. B claims that “In 90% of the cases when you go to take interviews from someone, who is occupying public service, you go there because it is “paid”, meaning he knows that you do not have the right to [...] do anything that would harm their image”. He suggests that the ministries pay the television channel that he works in via official, but overpriced advertisement deals. “For example, you have a slot for a minute – a minute and a half, which has to be aired in the advert block of the news and this slot is worth 500 leva, but it is sold for 1500”. In this way, according to him, the rest of the money is dedicated to a positive story in the news. Of course, as he and his colleagues in other media confirmed, these stories are not labeled as paid reports. The first time when B was acquainted with this mechanism was when he was told to cover a story in the Ministry of Agriculture. There, the PR officer made him a note that he has to show better attitude, because they were paying for it. Asked which ministries offer such deals, B responded “All of them”. A confirmation for the deals with the Ministry of the Agriculture was received by another respondent from another television channel. X personally covered stories, which were “paid” by the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Agriculture. His theory on the mechanism of payment is that the television channel receives 40,000 leva a month for 20 stories, connected

with “for example, the popularization of the Operational Program Environment”. The curious moment is not only the presence of the same ministry in the two channels, but also the fact that B referred to the European funds as the most “popularized”, as well:

B: There are contracts, which say “you go and shoot”, they promote different European programs and you shoot how they give this money and consequently no one follows if they really reached, you just shoot how they give one form, on which it is written “check for 5000 leva”, for example, or 50 000, whatever it has.

There is another, more classical type of political paid messaging. During elections, parties become more active and demand the largest share of the media coverage. As it seems, in some cases, they do not achieve it merely with allowed tools. Journalist J, who writes for a news website, belonging to a radio station, indicated that extensive coverage for particular parties is “a common practice”. She even defends and justifies the phenomenon:

It is officially not written that it is a paid story; the thing is that someone needs to figure it out alone; if one party is covered more than another an intelligent listener or reader can understand that it is a paid story.

The objectivity of the presented information and its bias is obviously left to the discretion of the news consumers, who are not supposed or required to possess the complete know how on political news making. Therefore, the media, which let themselves cover more intensively the paying political parties, are manipulative. They manipulate both the journalists, who are supposed to twist the news balance and the consumers, who end up soaked with information about one particular player. Not surprisingly, purchase of coverage is present for market players as well. Nevertheless, I should point out that it has been confirmed only by one interviewee in this research. B confirmed that his television agreed to place a product in the news in exchange for money.

B: There were some dudes, who promoted electronic cigarettes. They came and said [...] you are a business television, we launch a new business and we want you to shoot they said how much. And we went after them on the streets when they gave away electronic cigarettes and the logos had to be blurred, but [at the end] they were not. [...] They were walking around me and asking “do we pay now or later?”

A confirmation to the tendency of increasing underground servility of the Bulgarian mass media comes from diminishing investigative journalism. It seems that for the owners of local mass media it is more convenient to lobby or trade with their freedom of expression, than to pay for investigations. This is also welcome by the journalists, since for the low payment that they usually receive, investigative reporting is a highly undesirable job. In J’s opinion the closure of the investigative section in her media happened, because “there is no journalist to do this anymore”. When we recollect all the present problems that affect the job of an average Bulgarian journalist, it is most natural to assume that there is a very intense editorial control on their materials. Judging from the assumption that there is ownership conflict of interest with political and economic powers, as well as pressure from corrupted practices and decreased investigation, journalists are often interfered with censorship. The way in which this is executed is either with verbal pressure to change something, or with a direct removal of the stories. The following quote is an example of editorial verbal suppression:

B: I have been criticized for the fact that a talk from Stanishev (ex-Prime Minister) was cut longer, compared to the ones of Borisov (current Prime Minister) and Tzvetanov (current Minister of Interior). The editor of the newsroom came and asked me why. From then on, I do not know what happened.

Journalist X conducted an interview with an expert who criticized a particular measure, proposed by the government. In his words, the economist “firmly stated that this would harm the country. The material was not aired.” This is an example in which journalists cannot even argue about the right to air a story. Although the editors may argue that the materials have not featured the

necessary qualities, or they may provide other legitimate justification, it is more often the case when the journalists find a political reasoning. Only one journalist from my interviewee sample acknowledged that his coverage was removed, because of the quality. For example, journalist A's story has been removed with the excuse that he had put too much personal attitude. In the rest of the cases, the journalists suspect a political or corporate bias.

4.2. B. b) Owners and Journalists

The next set of evidence that I have indicated in my research is the working conditions in which owners of media put their employees. I have justified my expectation that the average journalists do not receive enough money, from the answers of almost all responders. Some of them even added that low as they are, the salaries are not the biggest problem. In their opinion, the attitude to them and the approach to the tasks are demeaning. Therefore, the motivation to accomplish their professional duties diminishes significantly. B confirms that "The salaries are often delayed. The contract says they need to be transferred on the 15th each month, but salaries before the 22nd are rarely transferred. The money is not enough." In his opinion, most of the professionals, especially those who have children, have to find a second job. He outlined the possibility for working for two media at the same time: "you can also work for a website and when you cover one event you can rewrite it and send it to the site [...] only if you are not in conflict of interest between the media," he adds.

However, for some of the employees, working as a journalist at two places simultaneously is not an option. In X's opinion the payment needs to be doubled, since he now receives less than 500 EUR a month, while having to work for 12 hours almost every day. For two other journalists, the

pay is not a problem, but only because they receive outside stimulus. Journalist J has “someone to help” her and journalist H still lives with his parents.

When you add this to the massive layoffs (which all journalists acknowledged for their media consequent to the crisis) you will definitely get very big insecurity for the future. In the common case, journalists doubt both their own future and in the future of the media they work for. H and his colleagues are “extremely pessimistic” for the future. Z “does not see” the television channel he works for in the future at all. “Everyone has the feeling to go away. There is too much pressure for nothing,” he confirms. Journalist A already quit, because he “found a job outside the sphere of journalism, which is better paid”. A sense of stability was felt only in the words of J, who claimed that the media is too large to close. So despite the low salaries, journalists at least feel secure there. Nevertheless, “over 20 people have quit”, because “their pay did not respond to their qualities,” in her words. It is natural to assume that if the sector is filled with people who do not get a sense of satisfaction, the whole environment would be unhealthy. The only excuse for the owners for keeping their employees’ salaries so low may be in the economic crisis and the financial challenges the sector experiences. Nevertheless, this is a problem that has been indicated in literature as far back as the year 2000 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001). Therefore, it might be inferred that owners in Bulgarian media disrespect their employees by forcing them to work in unfavorable conditions, even for the local low standards.

4.2. B. c) Outside Pressure on Journalists

Despite my expectation, there was not much evidence for frequent attempts for accountability of politicians to the media or the journalists directly. I expected that after the airing or printing a story, there would be frequent calls or emails to the offices of the media, expressing protests.

Also not a single journalist confirmed to have been tempted or threatened by outsiders in any way. To the question “were there cases in which politicians have expressed discontent from coverage” J responded:

Yes, with the claim that we have not quoted them right. To add to this, many times when politicians have said something and then read what they have said, they realize that they have been comprehended in a different way and attempt to correct themselves, by accusing the media that it has not quoted them right, or that he has not been interpreted right.

However, there are way more complaints that politicians, being in office or in opposition, treat journalists badly. The overall attitude, particularly of representatives of the executive power, is apparently demeaning. This situation is explicable for three different factors. The first is depicted by journalist B as the politicians “impunity”. The second, in his words is their “fear” not to say anything rushed, which could “harm their dignity”. The third very noticeable factor is that journalists do not possess enough professional self-confidence to be persistent in front of politicians. One of the reasons for this is the frequency of “paid” stories, in which the public figure is supposed to be presented in a positive light. The other reason is the poor situation in which journalists themselves are. Journalist A gives the example with their salaries: “how can a journalist go and push the Minister of Labor and Social Policy if they know that they are insured [by their employer] on a minimal wage?” Covering the minimal health insurance is a common practice in Bulgarian media [which is illegal and minimizes employers’ expenses]. “When you ask the Minister why is he doing one thing or another, he would ask “why your media is covering your insurance at 250 leva, although you get 1200,” A explained.

4.2. C. Summary of the Analysis

I found the majority of my assumptions well-based. Interviewees indicated the presence of significant restrictions to the proper execution of their job. The most striking problems were found in the first subset of my questions, which suggests editorial suppression. The other very important element is the worrisome environment in which they are supposed to work. Low payment, insecurity and conflicts dominate the rhetoric in their answers. As for the outside factors, it seems that politicians and outside circles do not have much of a direct contact with the interviewees. This diminishes the possibility of additional pressure on journalists' work, but also reaffirms the significance of editorial pressure. I may conclude that the biggest pressure that journalists experience is coming from the media's owners. They impose very limited independence on their employees via inside patterns of suppression. This position, allows owners to play around with political and corporate lobbying and servility to the most powerful outsiders.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the context of growing issues of media ownership, Bulgaria suffers from many of its aspects. More intensive nongovernmental criticism has outlined the problem as outstanding, compared to the basic level in the partner countries of the EU. The country's 80th position in *Reporters without Borders* ranking is not the only concern that has triggered the accomplishment of this work. The main question was why it drastically drops from the previous year. This, along with other criticisms, has led to the assumption that the ownership problem in Bulgarian private mass media is deepening. The results from the study were not disappointing at all. The descriptive analysis has indicated that the way, through which ownership developed in Bulgarian media, has been corrupted from the start (and continues to be corrupted). The current legislation allows the cover up of both source of investment and profit. This offers all necessary preconditions for easy concentration of media ownership. Concentration has, in fact, been noticeable two times in the history of Bulgarian transition – when the group of Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung occupied an exclusive portion of the print market, and now, when New Bulgarian Media Group concentrates television, radio and newspapers, which are considered affiliated to the government.

A reference to the content analysis conducted on seven print dailies, conducted by the Foundation Media Democracy, has helped to outline the present tendencies in corrupted coverage. Bulgarian newspapers focus exclusively on the agenda of the Prime Minister and the party in power GERB. Furthermore, they form a 'coverage cartel' with the main opposition party BSP, which automatically challenges new political players in the country. The findings also indicate that there are political and economic restrictions on the work of local journalists. Six journalists confirmed the assumptions, expressed by the experts in the analysis. Their interviews,

as a part of this study, have been very explicit on three main arguments: there is heavy editorial guidance on the content, the working conditions inside the media are demeaning, and outside pressure exists. Editorial guidance has been subcategorized in bias towards parties, restriction on freedom of expression, friendly/unfriendly attitudes to particular persons, and cancelation of potentially “dangerous” stories. A big majority of the interviewees confirmed that these tendencies occur on a regular basis. The managerial problems have been indicated through the low salaries, the layoffs, and the insecurity in the workplace. As for the outside factors, we can say that the results are mixed. On the one hand, there was an expressed discontent about the relationship between institutions or politicians and the journalists. On the other hand, none of the participants has confirmed that anyone has threatened or attempted to bribe them. This allowed me to confirm even stronger my assumption that the majority of the journalism issues derive from the management of the media. More narrowly, the issue of limited freedom of expression in Bulgarian media is a natural result of ownership irregularities.

Annex

Interview data and coding

Interview Data	
Categories	Issues
A. Editors and Journalists	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Editors tolerate bias to different parties 2. Editors restrict journalists in their reporting freedom 3. Editors dictate on the attitude to different parties (friendly and unfriendly) 4. Editors push journalists to cover stories, which are "ordered" by the sources 5. Editors call off stories, because of worries for outside feedback
B. Owners and Journalists	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Salaries are insufficient 2. The crisis resulted in significant cuts and layoffs 3. There is big insecurity for the jobs and for the future of the media
C. Outside pressure on journalists	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parties hold journalists accountable for what they have reported 2. Politicians are aggressive to journalists 3. Parties threaten journalists 4. Parties tempt journalists

	Interview Coding Sheet, Category A (Editorial Suppression on Journalists)
A1	<p>"In general parties with lesser weight are neglected in Bulgarian media"</p> <p>Nevertheless, there is a tendency in Bulgaria absolutely always to cover events related to the party in office, meaning whatever the Prime Minister does, he goes to meet someone, all the media are there, the President goes to a business breakfast with the Greek business, all the media are again there. The Minister of interior, who is for an unknown reason a very powerful figure in Bulgaria is again covered wherever he is. This is politics of the media and is put forward in such a way that if you do not have these events in your news, your news is not up to date.</p> <p>"They are very careful the things to keep the best quality for Boyko and GERB. More often editors come and check things many times. There is a horrible panic when the story is about Boyko."</p>
A2	<p>"In this holding there is a bank, airline company, pharmaceuticals industry, maritime shipping, river shipping, against these institution you cannot make reports. They are "our people". This is openly stated, you have to be insane to go and make a report against the banks. I mean, if there is a problem, it is solved inside the holding."</p> <p>"In all the rest of the media there is news how Kaolin is polluting [the nearby] village, how [...] cyanide in the water led to increased leukemia, etc. Naturally, the story in the newspaper was exactly the opposite."</p>
A3	<p>"There are moments in which there is a drive for the outage of someone as "bad"</p> <p>We have made stories aiming specifically against the former president Parvanov. Also very often they are against Ivan Kostov (Bulgarian PM 1997-2001), because he is a personal enemy to the boss. We are warned that we would be fired if we show his face in a story. This an unofficial rule.</p> <p>We have recently made an interview that was ordered by the boss, in which he expected to hear one sentence that Ivan Kostov needs to resign from politics. For sure the interview was put out of its context in order to be fulfilled what the boss wanted to hear.</p> <p>There are people, who are not welcome in the television.</p> <p>When I started in the first month I understood the whole censorship, who hates whom, what goals they have, and it even felt funny and it looks a bit like a kid's game, a bit funny.</p>

A4	<p>"In that media there has been a lot of events like business presentations, which had to be covered – I do not know what they were given for that, but they just sent the cameraman and the reporter and they covered it. Some of these reports were purely promotional."</p> <p>"There are contracts, which say "you go and shoot", they promote different European programs and you shoot how they give this money and consequently no one follows if they really reached, you just shoot how they give one form, on which it is written "check for 5000 leva", for example, or 50 000, whatever it has."</p> <p>"There were some dudes, who promoted electronic cigarettes. They came and said [...] you are a business television, we launch a new business and we want you to shoot they said how much. And we went after them on the streets when they gave away electronic cigarettes and the logos had to be blurred, but [at the end] they were not. [...] They were walking around me and asking "do we pay now or later?"</p> <p>"In 90% of the cases when you go to take interviews from someone, who is occupying public service, you go there because it is "paid", meaning he knows that you do not have the right to [...] do anything that would harm their image."</p> <p>"For example, you have a slot for a minute – a minute and a half, which has to be aired in the advert block of the news and this slot is worth 500 leva, but it is sold for 1500."</p> <p>"It happened only during election campaigns, when parties pay for coverage, which is a common practice. It is officially not written that it is a paid story; the thing is that someone needs to figure it out alone; if one party is covered more than another an intelligent listener or reader can understand that it is a paid story."</p> <p>"Many times. We have "advertisement" campaigns, which are "ordered" by ministries. We go to some events with the only goal to make a paid story. This is present in the Ministry of Environment and Water, Ministry of Agriculture, I have personally covered such stories. for example, the popularization of Operational Program Environment"</p>
A5	<p>"I have been criticized for the fact that a talk from Stanishev (ex-Prime Minister) was cut longer, compared to the ones of Borisov (current Prime Minister) and Tzvetanov (current Minister of Interior). The editor of the newsroom came and asked me why. From then on, I do not know what happened."</p> <p>"One of my stories has been removed, because it was against an idea of the party in power. The specific example is about the fiscal agreement, which was signed by the Ministers of the EU, the treaty for fiscal stability, there was one chapter, which was concerning tax synchronization. The government was initially planning to sign this part as well. I made an interview with an economist, who firmly stated that this would seriously harm the country. The material was not aired."</p>

	Interview Coding Sheet, Category B (Owners - Journalists Issues)
B1	<p>"There are many media in the private sector who not only pay low money, but also delay the salaries with a few months. I have been employed in one media from which they still owe me about 1000 leva (500 EUR)."</p> <p>"Naturally, journalism in Bulgaria needs to be more like a hobby than a profession – this is what he says in response to the question "have you needed to work a second job in order to get enough money".</p> <p>"People there feel relevantly calm – they are not held captive of the demon of laying off, but they hardly meet the everyday expenses of the people."</p> <p>"I quit because I found a job outside the sphere of journalism, which was better paid."</p> <p>There is another thing, how can a journalist go and push the Minister of Labor and Social Policy if they know that they are insured [by their employer] on the minimal wage? Covering the minimal health insurance is a common practice in Bulgarian media [which is illegal and minimizes employers' expenses]. According to him it is present in 98% of the media. When you ask the Minister why is he doing one thing or another, he would ask "and why is your media covering your insurance at 250 leva, although you get 1200?"</p> <p>"The salaries are often delayed. The contract says they need to be transferred until the 15th each month, but salaries before the 22nd are rarely transferred. The money are not enough." "You have to work something else, you can choose what it needs to be, because when you are a journalist you can work in a television and you can also work for a website and when you cover one event you can rewrite it and send it to the site [...] only if you are not in conflict of interest between the media. Yes, working one job is not enough."</p> <p>"I do not think that the salary is realistic [for the efforts]. It is honestly much less than what a person should get for the job they do, but I do not need to work something else, because I have someone to help me."</p>
B2	<p>"In the last three years over 20 people have quit. I think their pay did not respond to their qualities."</p> <p>"Our television was famous for the fact that too many people quit, first because of the attitude to them, which is really horrible and second because salaries are delayed. "</p>
B3	<p>"The major problem with that television was that people were really demotivated. They lied with the money. They treat you like a stray dog, not like a journalist."</p> <p>"Extremely pessimistic. We look to the future and we do not see the newspaper there, or we do not see ourselves there."</p> <p>"I do not see this television in the future. Everyone has the feeling to go away. There is too much pressure for nothing."</p>

	Interview Coding Sheet, Category C (Outside Pressure on Journalists)
C1	Yes, with the claim that we have not quoted them right. To add to this, many times when a politician has said something and then reads what they have said, they realizes that they have been comprehended in a different way and attempts to correct themselves, by accusing the media that it has not quoted him right, or that he has not been interpreted right.
C2	Their impunity. I mean, there is a very bizarre mix of arrogance and fear. They are arrogant because they think they are not punishable, but also fear from not saying anything that you could twist in a different way and respectively to harm their dignity, because they also depend on someone.
C3	N/A
C4	N/A

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