

Who is pressuring journalists and how: FROM POLITICIANS TO ADVERTISERS



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WHO IS PRESSURING JOURNALISTS AND HOW:

FROM POLITICIANS TO ADVERTISERS

There is no democracy without free media, which are the strong safeguard against the abuse of power. Having in mind the importance of free journalism for democracy, Gong, as a European *democracy watchdog*, has decided to conduct a pilot study on possible pressures and censorship in newsrooms in Croatia. The research was prepared and conducted by Đurđica Klancir, a journalist and editor with ample experience in media outlets of various publishers. She is also a member of the Council of Honour of the Croatian Journalists' Association.

It is a fact that the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and media legislation prohibit censorship, and the ruling party often claims that there is no censorship in the Croatian media.

“I don’t believe that there is censorship in any media in Croatia today. There is also room for those who have complained of censorship to withdraw those accusations or present evidence¹,” said, for instance, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, Minister of Culture and Media.

“I do not need an international analysis to see whether or not there is media freedom in Croatia. As someone who reads and follows media outlets on regular basis, I can guarantee that. I do not see the problem, it is more of an exaggeration than a real problem²,” said Prime Minister Plenković.

“There is no suppression of media freedom! Where exactly in Croatia are media not free?³,” asked the Prime Minister while addressing the media on 23 September 2021, after an attempt of court injunction of a series of texts on the portal H-Alter.

¹ <https://hr.n1info.com/vijesti/a362701-obuljen-u-hrvatskim-medijima-ne-postoji-cenzura-pravosudje-im-nije-prijetnja/>

² <https://hr.n1info.com/vijesti/a368577-ne-treba-meni-medjunarodna-analiza-davidim-ima-li-ili-nema-slobode-medija-u-hrvat/>

³ <https://hr.n1info.com/vijesti/plenkovic-nije-normalno-da-se-vladu-optuzuje-da-gusi-slobodu-medija-u-rh/>

Despite frequent warnings from the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) about pressures on the media, so far there has been no research of specific pressure mechanisms, i.e., models of censorship or self-censorship in the Croatian media outlets. Only the most dominant and most visible processes – such as lawsuits against the media and journalists have been spoken of – while more subtle mechanisms pertaining to the relation of politics and politicians towards newsrooms and those concerning the relation of newsrooms and their respective journalists have not been thoroughly investigated before.

Therefore, for the purpose of research on pressures and censorship in the Croatian media, we have addressed thirty experienced journalists and editors from various media – national outlets, Croatian National Television, the most influential private television companies, newspapers, and Internet portals. Thirty people were asked to fill out the questionnaire and twenty-three agreed to participate and answer the questions prepared by journalist Đurđica Klancir. The survey was conducted from 1 to 7 September 2021. Most questions allowed space for extensive explanation of answers, and all participants were guaranteed anonymity because the aim of the research was to obtain a general idea about the intensity of censorship and

pressure on journalists, as well as to gain insight into key models of censorship and pressures, rather than to detect the specific media where there is higher or lesser degree of censorship or pressure.

The questionnaire indicated actions contrary to the professional standards of journalism as defined in the Media Act⁴ and the Journalists Code of Honour⁵ as guidelines for respondents on what is considered pressure on journalists.

Given the sample of respondents and the method, it is important to emphasize that this is a preliminary, pilot study. Considering that the results have shown that there is censorship in the Croatian media landscape as well as an increasing number of censorship models within newsrooms, it is important to emphasize that this problem requires further research and effort to eliminate all mechanisms of censorship and pressure on journalists and the media.

4 <https://digarhiv.gov.hr/arhiva/263/18315/www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2004/1324.htm>

5 <https://www.hnd.hr/kodeks-casti-hrvatskih-novinara>

Out of the 23 respondents who filled out the questionnaire, nine of them work in the print media (which also have their own web publications), four are employed by public television, six work for private TV companies, and six for various news portals. Twenty-one respondents are journalists and two are editors. Their work experience in the media ranges from four to over thirty years.

MOST JOURNALISTS ARE EXPOSED TO PRESSURES IN THEIR WORK

Fifteen respondents answered “yes” and five answered “no” to the question “Have you witnessed any form of pressure on media freedom and professional work towards your newsroom in the last two years?”. Those who answered neither “yes” nor “no” have warned, for example, that they had witnessed failed attempts not to publish a piece of news. They also stated that there were pressures from advertisers, although not explicit. It was rather “about reducing and limiting the conditions of content production”.

Respondents explained that the pressures ranged from phone calls by individuals they wrote about, or other

powerful people, to attempts to stop the publication of articles. There have also been pressures within the publishing house by the advertisement sales department management with the explanation that writing about a certain topic would put off the advertisers.

Several respondents stated that there were fewer pressures from politics and more from the company they work for. “There have been indirect attempts to obstruct thematizing the business of one advertiser,” reads one of the explanations.

Another respondent remembers that “the title of the article was changed in order to reduce the damage to the Prime Minister and ministers, and the stories that were not in favour of an HDZ county governor had been removed from the portal.”

“Journalists are more frequently asked to write texts ordered by editors, with predetermined, often inaccurate theses. We are required to write camouflaged PR articles and native ads about both economic and political subjects (as if they were regular texts, not PR articles or native ads). A refusal can (and often does) result in a job loss, and almost certainly demotion,” says one explanation.

A television journalist states that she has witnessed certain guests being banned from the programme.

One of the journalists says there was a problem at a press conference due to a “question that the Prime Minister did not like”.

“The Prime Minister did not like my question. And not just him, but also the associates from a partner television that broadcasts our news. They called my editor claiming that their viewers were complaining about the reporter from another television and that they did not like such an approach. It turned out that until that moment, neither the question to the Prime Minister nor his answer had been broadcast on the news and their viewers could not have seen them in the programme. The complaint was of a different nature. My television and the Editorial Board stood by me. In fact, this situation motivated us to work on a special story triggered by the Prime Minister’s reaction to journalists’ questions,” states a description of the pressure witnessed by one of the respondents.

Another respondent claimed that he “has witnessed censorship, pressures, selective reporting, intimidation and deterioration of all professional standards” within

the news programme of a national television.

One of the answers states that an entire investigative news show has been moved to a less-watched channel and broadcast at non-prime time, thus being marginalized, which can be considered pressure.

| FORBIDDEN TOPICS

Ten people answered “yes” and eleven “no” to the questions: “Have you been banned from dealing with a certain topic in the past two years? Has your superior asked you or the wider editorial circle not to deal with certain topics in general, or within a specific period of time?”

In one case it was clarified that the show was “not banned”, just postponed because of the advertiser. It eventually aired.

In their explanations, respondents have described specific cases:

“During the election campaign, a colleague was asked to

wait with a report.” We also learn that it was forbidden to “report about the COVID-19 outbreak in a town in the spring of 2020, from which the epidemic spread throughout the respective county during the first wave”.

A respondent wrote that he was “not allowed to invite certain guests”.

One of the journalists describes his experience of being “taken down” from reporting about a well-known Croatian company because their PR department did not like his articles, although they were written in quite a positive tone.

Another journalist was not permitted to write about the energy industry even though he had followed that sector for years and had valuable and useful information.

“It was also forbidden to write about certain chain stores because they were large advertisers. On the other hand, I was asked to write a feature about companies connected with the (now deceased) mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, but that article has never been published, although I have been told that it was good and it would be published,” claims one of the journalists.

A respondent warns that the Editorial Board of a private TV company where she works does not want to thematize LGBTI rights. “I have been told that we will publish only big news regarding sexual minorities, but we should not write detailed stories about such topics, nor promote such values,” she says.

“A company we had sent an inquiry to contacted the Editorial Board. They asked us to wait with publishing the article because the timing did not suit them. However, they did not answer my question or explained why they required the postponement,” explained one of the respondents.

One of the journalists says that “publishing of an authorized interview with a Member of the European Parliament (foreign citizen) has been banned,” despite the prior editorial approval. The journalist was told why the interview had not been published. It was explained that the interviewee was attacking Croatian national interests, thus putting the editorial board at risk of possible lawsuit. Furthermore, the respondent wrote that “the editor-in-chief decided not to publish an article for which prior approval had also been obtained.”

“The article was written according to the highest professional standards, the questions had been sent to all the interested parties and their answers were included,” explained the journalist in Gong’s questionnaire.

A TV journalist claims that topics “that could damage the reputation of the ruling HDZ party” are being avoided, ignored, or modified, and “that prior to his death, Milan Bandić had the same treatment as did the other HDZ’s coalition partners.”

“The discoveries of journalists from the other media outlets (Tolušić, Žalac, Kušćević, Kujundžić, Marić, etc.) are also ignored up until the moment when they can no longer be ignored due to the public reaction of the ruling party,” states a person who has witnessed pressures and practices contrary to the standards of journalistic practice at the Croatian National Television.

WHO PUTS THE STRONGEST PRESSURE ON JOURNALISTS?

When asked to indicate persons or topics they were not allowed to write/report about because it would be controversial, the respondents could tick several proposed answers. There was also room to specify the cause(s) of pressure.

Eight participants answered that they were forbidden to write/report about companies, and seven said that these companies were advertisers. Four journalists stated that they were prohibited to write or report about certain politicians, and four were banned from thematizing the ruling party. Three respondents had problems because they thematized the Prime Minister, three because of ministers, and one because of an opposition party. Thematizing of institutions was prohibited to four participants, and in one case the censors were TV company owners themselves.

WHAT ARE THE EXCUSES FOR TAKING DOWN ARTICLES AND TELEVISION REPORTS?

Seven participants replied positively, 15 negatively, and one respondent wrote that “the show he works on has been moved to the channel with low ratings” when asked “Has any written and finished article or television piece of yours been ‘taken down’ or remained unpublished in the past two years?”.

We asked the participants who replied positively to the question above to explain the reasons their employers had given in more detail (it was possible to tick multiple answers or to write their own). Four of them answered that they had been told that publishing/airing could damage the publisher, i.e., the medium they work for. Three respondents had been told that “publishing/airing would cause a termination of business relationship with the advertiser who was the subject of the article/report,” while another three never got an explanation why their article/report was taken down. One of the participants said that nothing was taken down because the “forbidden” topics were never proposed at all.

WHO IS TRYING TO INFLUENCE THE STORIES?

Twelve respondents answered “yes”, and seven “no” to the question “Has anyone tried to influence you during the preparation of the article, report or TV piece; suggest the direction of your investigation, conclusions or the like, contrary to the standards of your profession?”. Some added that “sometimes there were clumsy editorial attempts,” or that it was “indirect”.

Some respondents also explained their answers in more detail: “Theses for comments are imposed, articles are ordered.”

“We are asked about the identity of our interviewees and interlocutors,” reads one explanation.

“Such interventions would usually occur right before writing an article. In my articles I have always had at least two sides and they generally did not forbid it, although they were not always happy about it. However, there were situations when they suggested, or even insisted upon me talking to someone whose attitudes towards

the particular topic they had already known,” replied one of the journalists.

Some of the answers were the following:

“Politicians and PR people often give themselves the right to suggest how the story should develop.”

“Editors do not dare to interfere with the work process. However, I cannot make them publish finished texts.”

“There was no influence because I do not participate in the creation of the programme which is in the focus of the Editorial Board and which they consider important, I was dismissed from that position.”

To the question: “If someone tried to influence your journalistic or editorial work, can you pinpoint the source of pressure in more detail?” where respondents could tick more than one answer, nine of them ticked “PR office of the subject written or reported about.”

Seven respondents stated that the source of pressure was the subject of their journalistic work, seven were pressured by politicians from the ruling party, and four by

opposition politicians. Seven participants encountered pressure from their superior editor, six from publisher's management or media owners, five from marketing/ad sales department, and four reported attempts to influence them through unexpected intermediaries, such as acquaintances.

WHO ARE THE UNTOUCHABLES IN THE MEDIA?

Twelve respondents gave negative answers, but eight said that they witnessed such a practice when asked “Has your medium ever communicated, through formal or informal channels, that you should not write/report about certain individuals?” Are there so-called sacred cows, the untouchables who are not written about at all or can only be written about in a strictly controlled, i.e., positive manner?”

Some journalists warned about vague situations when bans are not direct or clear. Instead, they are told that “the topic is not great” and excuses are sought. One of the respondents has reminded that a TV company has an unwritten rule to not cover “topics about sexual minorities”.

We asked journalists who have witnessed the practice of bans on reporting about certain individuals or that of suggesting strictly positive treatment of such people to determine the specific area the “untouchables” come from. Seven respondents answered that those were the people from large companies, seven more answered that they cannot touch advertisers, five said that they are banned from thematizing people from political parties, four are prohibited to report on certain entrepreneurs, and four respondents claim that the untouchables come from the Government. One answer mentions an HDZ’s county governor, and another the leadership of the Croatian National Television.

THREATS, LAWSUITS, BURGLARIES, REMOVAL FROM THE PROGRAMME...

As many as 16 people answered positively to the question “Have you personally been exposed to pressure after publication of a text or TV feature in the past two years?”, while only six people answered that they were not.

Those exposed to pressures could provide a detailed description of their respective experiences. “The director asked for a statement on the preparation of the article because the company, a large advertiser, threatened to terminate the contract,” says one of the respondents.

“Before and after the publication of the article, there were strong pressures in the form of telephone calls, legal threats and then the filing of lawsuits, criminal and civil, hate speech, threatening messages,” explains another.

Some respondents mention “pressures from the editors, mobbing” as well as “the actors disqualified my work as fake news and media lynching, publicly and on social media”.

“Most often no one would tell me that they were dissatisfied with the article, especially because the article in question would have a much higher-than-average number of clicks. That “problem” was usually solved by editors giving me the same topic the next day but requiring me to deal with it from a different angle. Even more frequently they would not say anything to me. Instead, they would simply give the same topic to another journalist even though it had already been published ,” explains one of the respondents.

“There were several negative comments, but a comment made by an entrepreneur after the report from the trial was especially striking,” says one explanation.

“It is mostly about lawsuits. However, a former minister reported me and my editor to the police, falsely claiming that we tried to extort money from him, threatening that we would publish the text if he did not comply. We both had to go to the police station and testify because they had already launched an investigation. The inspector himself told me that he would have aborted the investigation long ago, but then he added: ‘Well, you know how things go,’” wrote one of the journalists in her reply.

“We received phone calls from the politicians and other people we wrote about; the city we wrote about terminated our business cooperation, cancelled contracts, withdrew advertisements. Another person I wrote about tried to obstruct writing about himself through informal channels (he failed),” reads one of the descriptions.

“I have received opinions about my articles through colleagues in form of ‘friendly’ messages, SLAPP threats (lawsuits were not filed, but during the preparation and after the publication of the text, different law firms

threatened me with lawsuits), my apartment was broken into but almost nothing was stolen. After an hour and a half of taking fingerprints, forensics did not find a single fingerprint, not even mine or my children's. I have no evidence that this is directly related to the job. The editor-in-chief pays lip service to supporting me but his attitude towards me changed dramatically two years ago, after the ban on publishing an interview and the international incident and interrogation that followed. After 23 years at work, I have not been promoted, my salary and status are the same. My request to write columns has been denied twice," describes one of the journalists in her reply.

"The answer to the last question is conditionally positive. There are fiercely negative comments on social networks, many of which can be considered a threat. Also, some people I wrote about have threatened me with lawsuits (and some of these threats have materialized). There was no institutional pressure," reads one of the explanations.

"It was more about pressures from the guests who, after the interview, felt a need to tell me that I was incorrect and that my questions were different from what I had said in the preparation of the interview."

“Although the show I work on has been marginalized and moved to a lower-rated channel due to airing reports that brought government scandals to the fore, discussing topics that were not present in other parts of the programme and having guests who were not invited to key news programmes, I have been advised to “tone down”. Moreover, the budget for the show is constantly decreasing, so every season we are on the verge of shutting down the entire show, which is the only investigative TV magazine on our television. No one knows when the show is going to be aired – the time and the day of the broadcast change every season.”

“The article was about a bill published on the official Internet page called eSavjetovanje. The ministry that proposed the law complained to the Editorial Board because some of the interlocutors dared to criticize the bill and the ministry was not contacted for comment after the fact. It was explained to me that I should not write about matters concerning the ministry itself or those within their competence unless I asked them for a comment, opinion, statement, regardless of the fact that by the logic of things the bill itself represents their position on the issue.”

It was possible to tick several answers to the question “If you were exposed to pressure after the publication of a text or TV feature, can you explain in more detail what kind of pressure it was?”. Ten participants replied that they had been threatened with prosecution. Nine journalists were told by the editors that certain problems had arisen after publication of the article. Nine respondents received phone calls from persons they wrote/reported about. As many as four people who filled out the questionnaire received threats. Three respondents learned that after the publication of the text they were not allowed to deal with that topic anymore. One person received a phone call directly from the marketing/ad sales department, and one was criminally charged.

FROM CENSORSHIP TO SELF-CENSORSHIP

“Was it your decision not to deal with a certain topic or write about a certain person so that you would not have problems during the preparation or after publishing?”, was the final question. As many as twenty respondents gave negative answers, but there were three positive replies.

Several respondents clarified the matter:

“I think it is the journalist’s duty to resist any pressure that could hinder us from doing our job professionally.”

“The topic of adoption of children by same-sex couples is important, but I did not suggest it because I had already known the answer.”

“I no longer write about several companies that are a forbidden topic in our newsroom.”

“Despite the ban, I repeatedly questioned the Editorial Board’s decision and demanded direct explanations. For months, I requested the interview to be published and pointed out the responsibility of the Editorial Board for the consequences of such a decision – ethical consequences, because the processes which had been warned about in the interview would continue to happen, as well as the potential warnings of the European Parliament regarding media freedom.”

“If I were afraid of such problems, I would not work in journalism.”

EDITORS AS AN EXTENDED ARM OF THE MANAGEMENT AND AN INSTRUMENT OF PRESSURE

The survey has shown that most journalists witnessed some form of pressure in the newsrooms. A considerable number of journalists admitted that they were banned from working on certain topics.

According to research results, the strongest pressure on journalists is exerted by different companies, especially large advertisers, followed by politicians and political parties. Journalists recognize companies, i.e., advertisers and their intermediaries – most often PR agencies – as a source of significant pressure they experienced in their work.

The editorial practice of direct orders to journalists not to write about certain people, companies, or political subjects, or to write about them only in a positive tone is rather worrying. Some of the respondents have witnessed such practices.

Along with external pressures, calls, and legal threats from the individuals being reported about, the research has found that a significant share of respondents also encountered pressures within the media they work for, either through the editor or publisher's management (seeking explanations, suggestions to stop reporting about specific topics, etc.)

Since editorial boards should support journalistic work instead of being an extended arm of the media company's management, it is especially worrying that the series of respondents' answers show that editors have in many cases become an instrument of pressure on journalists, rather than the advocates of professional standards of journalism. Their answers also uncover direct interference of the management and the advertisement sale departments in journalistic work and content.

Although the Media Law draws the line between the publisher's influence on the newsroom and defines the editor-in-chief as the newsroom's representative, the results of this pilot study have proven that the implementation of these values is absent. Therefore, it is extremely important to warn of the real situation in newsrooms before the amending procedure concerning the Media

Act has started. The Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) and media legislation should both try to find new mechanisms for strengthening the professional standards and the position of journalists against the centres of power that try to influence their work.

The results of this pilot study show that there is censorship in the Croatian media landscape, as well as an increasing number of censorship models within newsrooms, so we can conclude that this problem requires further research and effort to eliminate all mechanisms of censorship and pressure on journalists and the media.