

REGIONAL MEDIA IN BULGARIA: THE LIMITS OF SURVIVAL

Policy Brief No. 57, September 2015

The lack of adequate local media is a trend with devastating implications for the regions of Bulgaria. It affects not only the local public institutions; regional economic activity is also hindered by the absence of independent media. At the same time, when discussing the state of media in Bulgaria, the problems of local media are often overlooked.

Methodology

In 2015, the Center for the Study of Democracy conducted a survey of 179 local media with internet presence (excluding media in the city of Sofia and greater Sofia region). The selection excluded sites which provide purely commercial or entertainment content, local guides, corporate platforms, and narrowly specialised media, such as education, sports, or fashion focused programming. Most of the media included in the survey generates content on a daily basis aimed at informing the public about events and processes covering various aspects of public life. Thus, the daily frequency is considered common practice for the media. Ten articles were selected from each media source, on the basis of visibility on their respective sites. Over 1 700 texts were reviewed and selected within the first ten days of September 2015. Systematic data was collected about the coverage of the media, staff, ownership, types of content

KEY POINTS

- **Public and private national media have sporadic presence in the regions.** In five of Bulgaria's regions (Lovech, Montana, Pernik, Silistra, and Yambol), there is no local branch of any national media. Thus, regions are barred from taking an adequate role in the informational exchange. Public media should get targeted financing to cover all regions.
- **A considerable part of the regional media does not publish information about their owners, their staff, or the advertising services they offer.** Publication of these data should become the normal practice, and in the future an online registry of all media dedicated to informing the public should be established.
- **Posting the terms for advertising and information services should be made a legal requirement, along with clear identification of all paid content.**
- To improve their legitimacy and enable communication with their audience, **media should publish data about their staff on their official sites.**
- **Industry associations and specialized nonprofit organizations should monitor the quality of media content** and encourage media and journalists to create analytical and investigative publications through national rankings and professional awards.

In cooperation with:

published and topics of reviewed materials, authors, comments under the publications, relations with the local authorities, and advertisers.

The analysis focused on the mechanisms and factors that prevent journalists and the media from informing the public in an objective, competent, and comprehensive way.

The state of the regional media environment was evaluated through six indicators: **density of media content; transparency; pluralism and debate; respect of copyright; political independence; and economic independence.**

Density of media content

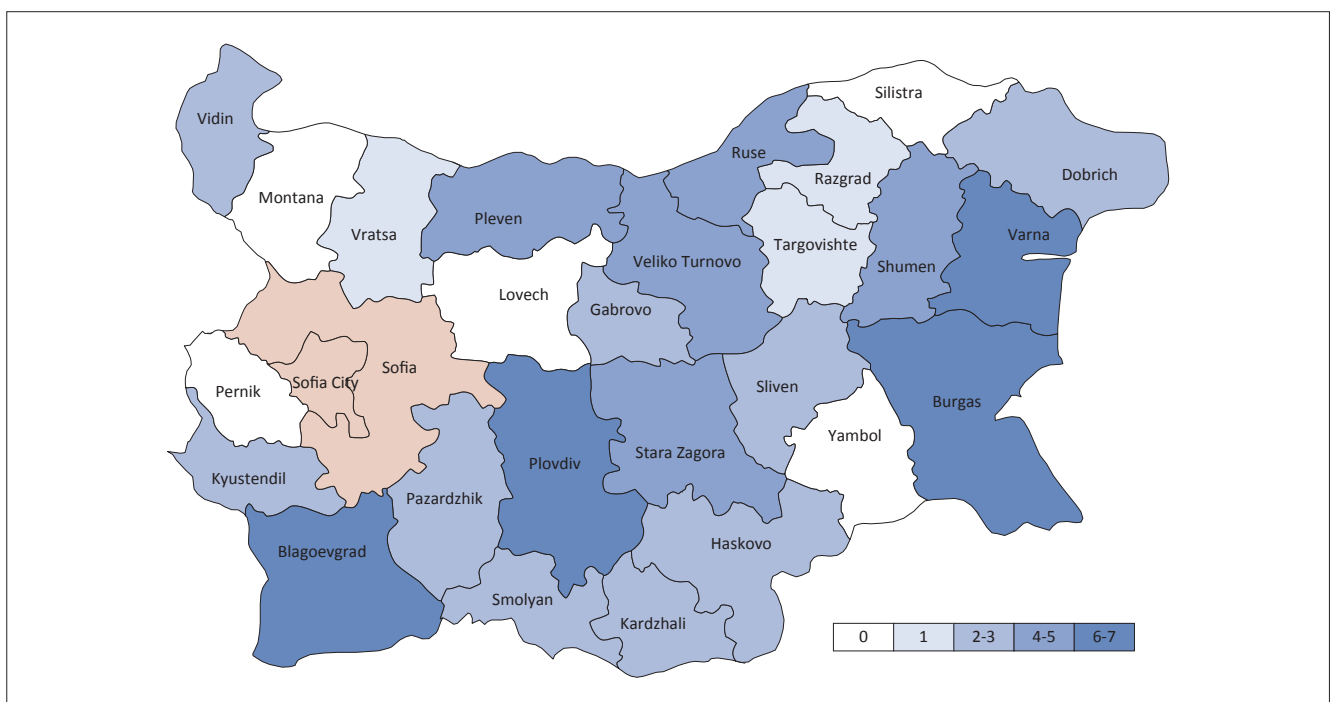
Density of media content depends on the size of the potential audience, the number of media outlets, and the number of generated media publications. The more media outlets operate in a given region, the more competitive the information environment is. To avoid any bias, the analysis of density focused only on the regional centers and offices of national media: www.bnt.bg www.bnr.bg; www.darik.bg, www.topnovini.bg www.focus-radio.net, www.bulgaria.

www.utre.bg, www.dnevnik.bg. The total number of these outlets for all regions is 64.

The map indicates that **national media have very uneven representation in the country's regions.** Decisions about the network of branches and regional offices may not always reflect the current state and needs of individual regions, and sometimes may be the result of random circumstances. In five regional centers (Lovech, Montana, Pernik, Silistra, and Yambol) national media outlets do not maintain any local presence, and in another three regions (Vratsa, Razgrad, and Targovishte) there is only one regional office of national media.

Obviously, national media chains enjoy significant advantages and privileges as far as advertisers, national and local politicians, magistrates, and law enforcement are concerned. Thanks to their network of national reporters, national media outlets have the capacity to take a more comprehensive and pluralistic approach when covering events. The presence of journalists representing national media in the regions allow local topics to reach the national and international information exchange, and has an overall positive effect on the local information and

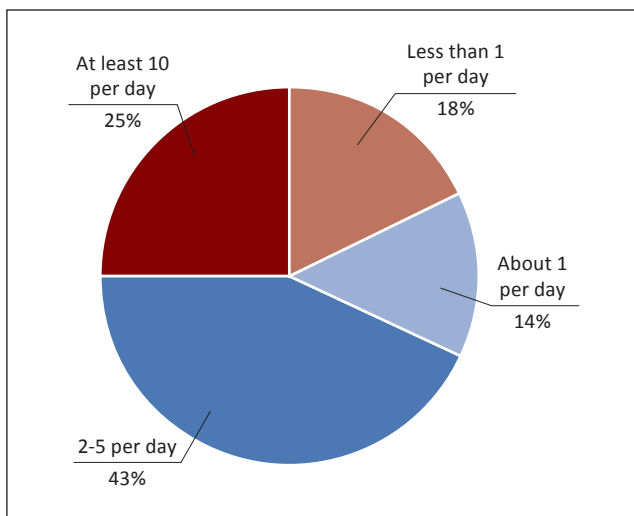
Figure 1. Regional representation of national media



media environment. At the same time, the scale of national media chains may lead to ‘industrialization’ of the content generation process. Topics may be filtered to comply with the requirements of national media consumption. If news is too local or too complicated, stories could not interest a wide enough audience, while at the same time risk losing the specific local context. These reasons are why national networks cannot fully replace the authors of local media content.

Another indicator of media density is the **frequency at which media content is generated**. If local media outlets produce and distribute more information, the local audience would be more inclined to use and discuss it. Figure 2 presents the distribution of local media by frequency of publications.

Figure 2. Frequency of media publications



Only 25% of regional media publish more than 10 pieces per day. About a third publish less than one piece per day (i.e. they would not qualify as a daily media). Another significant share of regional media, 43%, publish between 2 and 5 pieces per day.

Transparency

Transparency, or the state of trust among public actors who do not undertake any unforeseeable actions, includes the ability of all interested parties to openly express their positions. Transparency also involves systematic efforts to improve mutual trust.

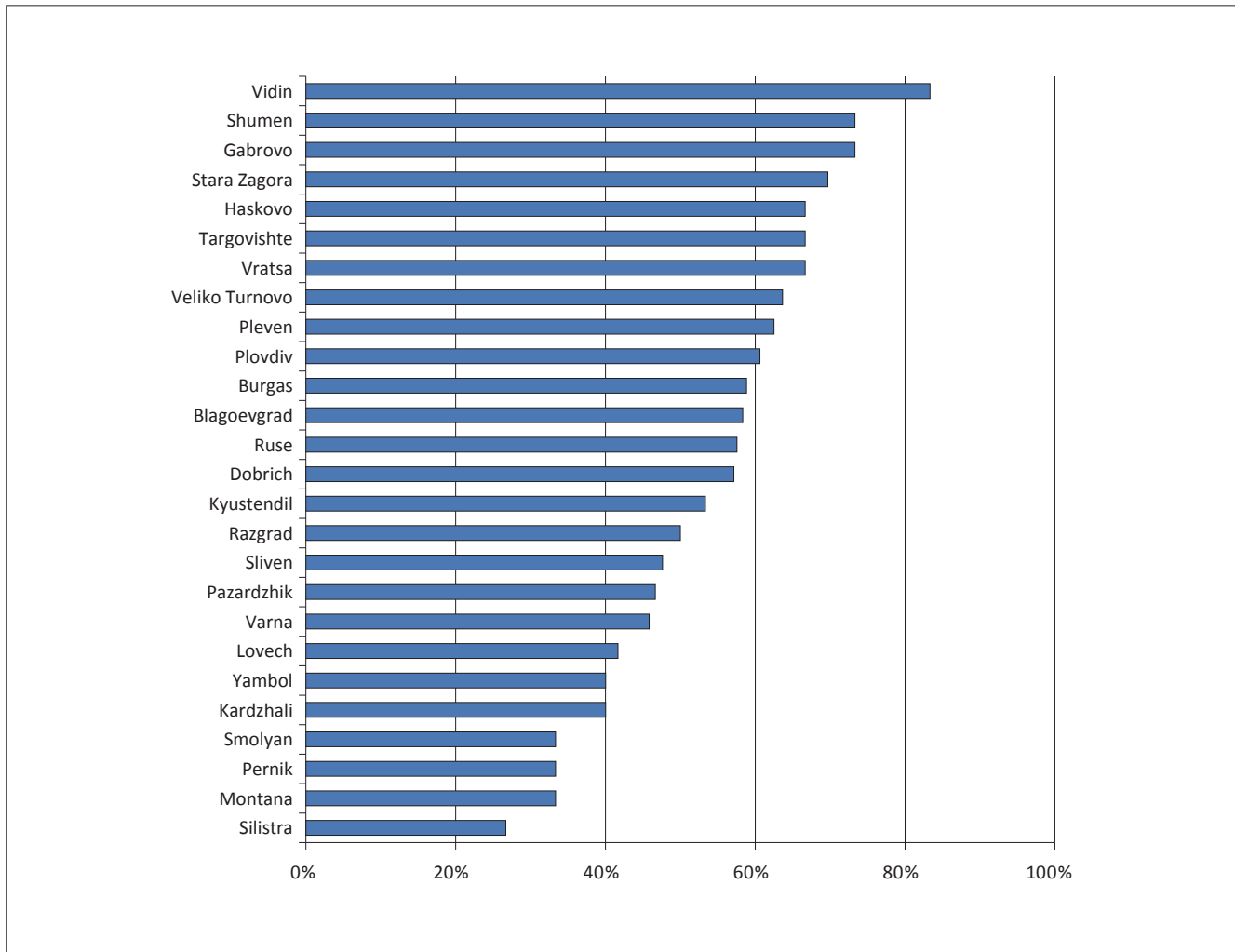
Openness of media reflects their willingness to disclose data about their owners, such as the judicial person, head of operations, and legal representative. Only 52 media outlets, less than 30%, have adequately indicated this data on their web sites. If this omission is due to negligence with the smaller regional media, it is unacceptable for national media with well-established public presence.

Published terms for advertising and for paid publications imply a clear model of financing, possibility of verification of income, and business-oriented management of the respective media. Forty-six media outlets (25%) have not declared how they are financed through advertising. Very few of them are nonprofits and do not receive any income from advertising. **The publication of terms for advertising can also be viewed as a mechanism to prevent unsanctioned financing of the media through the hidden economy.**

While online access has improved the options for direct contact between authors and consumers of media content, it cannot guarantee meaningful communication. **Media outlets need to provide data about their staff.** Out of 179 media, 114 have not published the names and positions of their staff. It is not known how many people are employed in regional media, the professional structure, or how media can justify their membership in various industry associations or other civil initiatives. The omission of staff data is typically not only for small, but also for the large media, including the public media. Journalists from regional media outlets claim they perform mostly administrative and technical functions, and that traditional media teams no longer exist. While many journalists outside the capital may be unhappy with their work, they have very few alternatives in their regions. Thus, turnover at regional media is low. The gap in professional skills between journalists in the capital and in the regions is enormous, but regional media rarely offer opportunities for advanced professional training.

Regional journalists could be motivated through an industry or trade union monitoring and evaluating regional media publications, to include an award

Figure 3. Transparency index (% of media with declared owner, advertising terms, and staff)



for media and articles that respect the principles of pluralism, tolerance, and competence.

Pluralism and debate

Pluralism stands for the presence of multiple viewpoints on public issues. It guarantees the informed public opinion of citizens and leads to decisions based on comparisons of different viewpoints.

The ratio between regional, national, and international topics covered in media reflects the openness of the media in question. Over 81%, or 1 429 out of 1 748, of reviewed articles cover regional topics. 218 concern issues at the national level, and expectedly only a few articles were dedicated to international topics (101). This asymmetry is understandable given the focus on regional media. However, the problem is that a closer

look at the materials reveals multiple repetitions of articles.

The ratio between **the informative and analytical articles** reflects the extent to which media investigates and analyses the topics it covers. The informative texts only provide the main facts on a certain event. The analytical texts, on the other hand, present not only the facts, but provide considerations on the prerequisites and circumstances around the case, and provide different viewpoints and analytical evaluations. Over 88% of the reviewed articles are only informative in nature. This is due to predominantly economic reasons. The publishers are seeking the spontaneous reactions of consumers to interpret and share the content, which guarantees higher advertising revenues. This process could also be attributed to the changes in the communication channels.

The ratio between articles **on public issues and on private life** determines whether an edition could be considered as a “serious” or “yellow” media. The former type of media content relates to news about public events and issues, while the latter concerns the private life of public figures or “ordinary” people, who have experienced an accident of good fortune (e.g. won the lottery). The more the articles focus on public issues, the more active the debate on the local public life is. 72% of the reviewed articles cover public issues (Figure 4). Thus, regardless of the numerous “yellow” temptations, the majority of regional media tries to cover public topics. The share of articles on public matters is the highest in Yambol, while in Haskovo, Plovdiv, and Razgrad, “yellow” media content prevails.

Among more than 1 700 articles, a total of 38% concern either entertainment topics (21%) or cover criminal cases (9%) or incidents (8%).

- Expectedly, the share of local news is the highest (48%). The majority of the articles, however, are a simple representation of information provided by local authorities. Examples being announcements of upcoming and finalized construction works, or new infrastructure in the municipality.
- Only a few media outlets are actively taking a stand on important local public problems and maintain their role as corrective to local authorities. The analytical articles expressing critical opinion are only 5% and are concentrated in the bigger regional towns (Burgas, Varna, Plovdiv,

Figure 4. Ratio between publications on public and private topics in different regions (index 10 – public; index 0 – private)

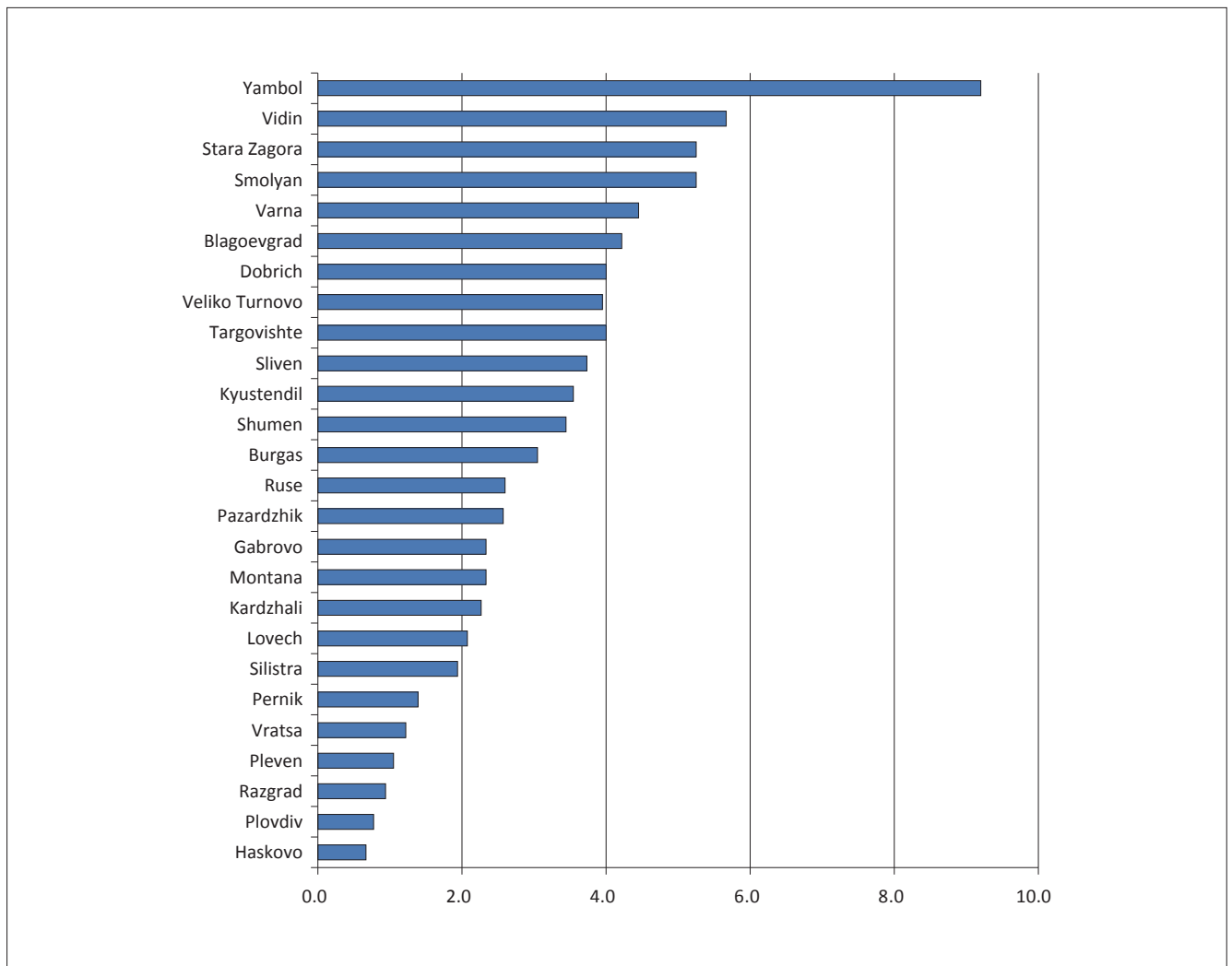
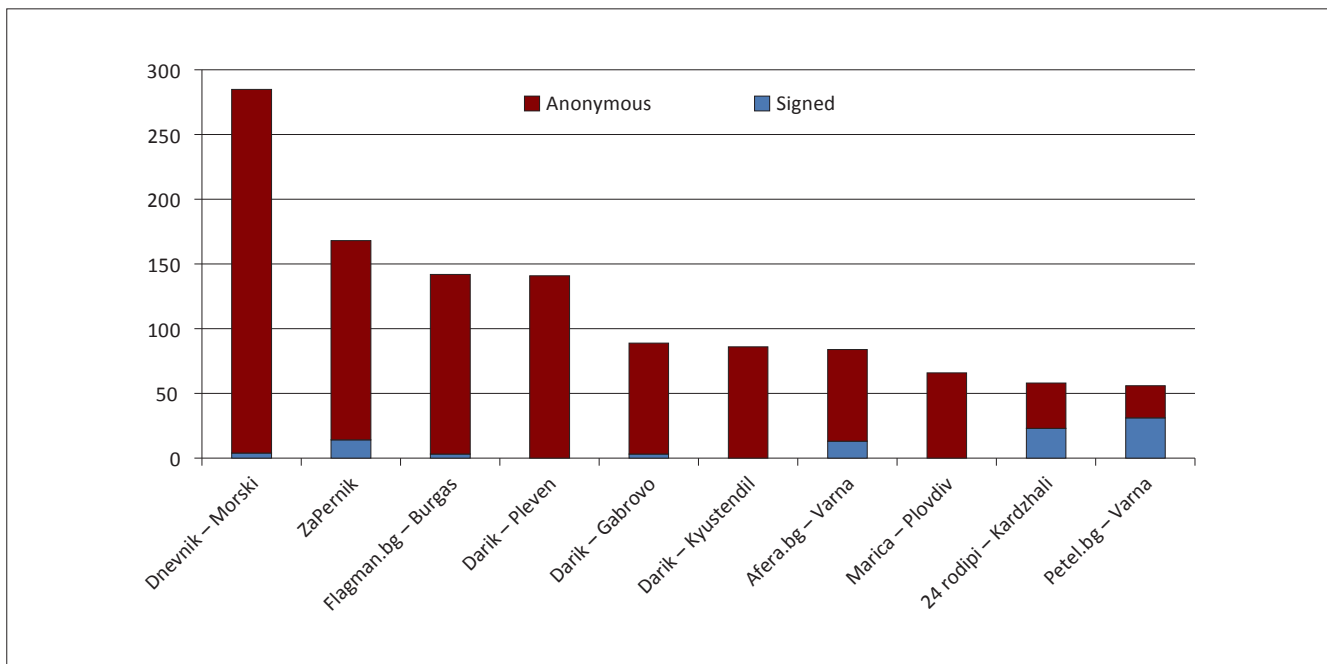


Figure 5. Number of comments in media (Ten media with the highest number of comments)



Ruse) and a few smaller towns (Vidin, Pazardzhik, Yambol). In many regions critical texts are missing altogether.

- The headlines and the writing style are either uninformative and trivial, (Burgas’ firemen are celebrating, Excellent students were awarded in Vratza) or absurd and ridiculous (A drunk cow fell in the rakia vat).

The comments under articles are an excellent indicator of the attitude of the readers towards the information content. However, comments are to be subject to more and more strict regulations. Recently, an interpretative decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled that publishers are responsible for the anonymous opinions expressed on their websites.

The edition that has the highest amount of comments is “Morski dnevnik” („Морски дневник”), but it publishes on average only one article a day. Another edition from Varna – www.petel.bg, has the highest number of signed comments.

The issue of comments could be particularly interesting for analysis as it involves the modes for their administration, the culture of debate, and the

promotion of self-expression. They should gradually become part of the processes of media management and should be included in **codes of conduct, quality standards, industry agreements**, and any other self-regulation initiatives.

Respect of copyright

Copyright as a system of legal norms that regulate and protect intellectual property, implies the practice of stating the names of the authors of media publications.

Journalists from regional media are largely unhappy with the lack of respect of their copyright. Internet media often violates copyright, using mot-a-mot pieces without obtaining permission for reproduction, or even mentioning the source. There are practically no standards for control and regulation of authored texts. The one-man-show media (operating without reporters) are believed to be the most frequent abusers of copyright.

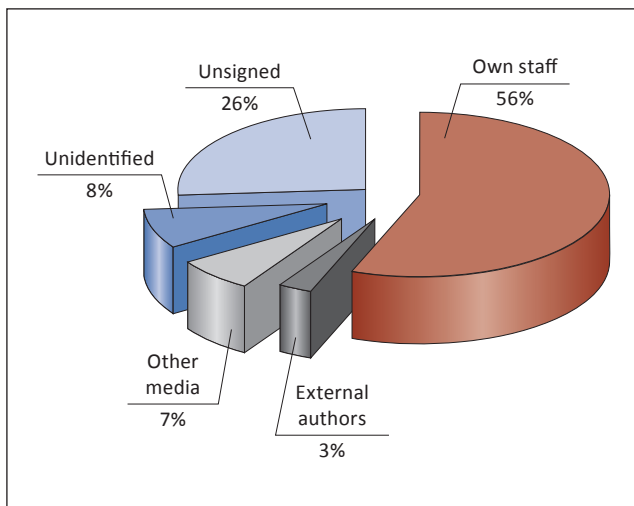
Journalists working in public media in the regions complained that the application of copyright law seems to be limited to the capital and is disregarded elsewhere.

The majority of texts published by regional media is generated by their own staff. About a quarter of the content is not signed. Certain publications are signed, but it is not clear whether the author is part of the staff, as there is no listing of the media staff. Only 7% of the publications quote a source, and only 3% are signed by external authors.

Thus, by and large regional media employs a strategy of survival. They get more and more isolated, either by compromising the quality of their own content, or by openly violating copyright and publishing somebody else's intellectual products.

The Law on copyright and related rights should be amended with texts that protect journalists and envision harsher sanctions to prevent copyright violations. Standards for presentation of authored publications need to be adopted for online media.

Figure 6. Authorship of publications in regional media



Political independence

Regional media have a variety of relations with local authorities. In part of the regional newspapers, the municipalities are either a majority stakeholder or have been shareholders (e.g. „Narodno delo“ newspaper in Varna). Among the surveyed media there are also two municipality radio stations (Pleven and Veliko Tarnovo). Journalists at regional media level claim that the ‘buying’ of media by local

politicians is becoming more and more widespread. Local authorities are eager to secure media comfort and favorable attitudes, in particular at times of pre-election campaigns. What is more, **some employees in the local administrations are specifically hired to supply controlled information to local media.**

As a rule, municipalities employ a significant number of PR experts for the mayor, the deputy mayors, the municipality council, and even photographers and other employees with unspecified positions and responsibilities. Their task is to produce daily “good news” that emphasize that everything in the respective town works well. In some regions, up to 90% of the budgets of local papers are financed by the municipality.

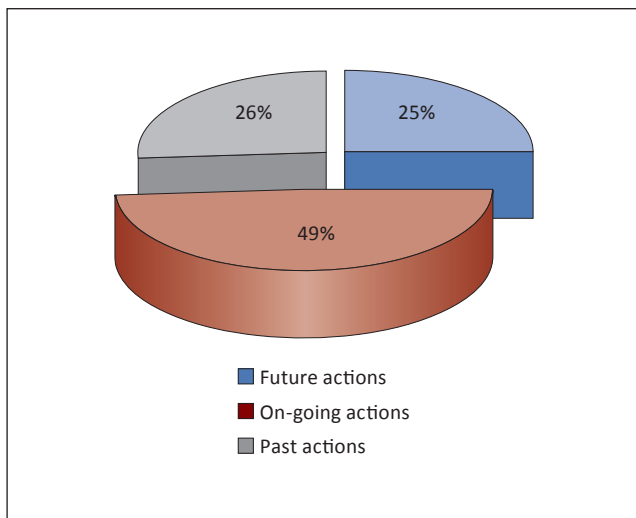
The financing of loyal media is carried out through **channeling of advertising budgets, publishing of announcements by the municipality, and tenders for informational campaigns for the EU operational programmes.** The big problem with the financing of regional media lies in the opaque tender procedures. Municipality-owned companies and municipality councils buy advertising space worth hundreds of thousands of euros in well selected, loyal media. On the surface, everything looks legal, as the advertising budgets are channeled through third-parties that are selected in public tenders.

The lack of political independence is demonstrated in the way media stimulates open debate on the performance of local authorities. In this respect, three types of publications were identified: **past, ongoing, or future activities of the local authorities.** A further classification included **loyal vs critical publications,** and **anonymous, editorial, or signed publications.**

About half of the analysed publications deal with past activities, while almost equal numbers deal with either ongoing or future activities. Thus, in three quarters of the publications about local government the media discuss actions that cannot be influenced (as they are either completed or the decision to implement them has already been taken). In other words, the media can play a very limited role as corrective of executive power. Keeping in mind that only a third

of all publications are dedicated to local government issues, it turns out that less than 10% of the media content discusses the future development of the respective towns and regions.

Figure 7. Analyses of local government in regional media



The data about the share of critical (vs loyal) publications is even more disturbing: loyal materials outnumber critical ones almost 3 times (in the sample, there were 392 loyal vs 140 critical ones). In a number of regional centers (Montana, Smolyan, Targovishte, and Haskovo) critical publications were altogether missing in the local media. In Kardzhali, Vratsa, Vidin, Dobrich, Pleven, and Veliko Tarnovo loyal material were five times more than critical ones. The only two regions where there was a parity between loyal and critical materials were Varna and Pazardzhik. The overall impression is that the content in regional media is tightly controlled by local governments.

Economic independence

Journalists and managers of regional media define their economic position as extremely difficult. **Part of the media finds a solution by engaging in non-related activities, which inevitably undermine the quality of media content they produce.** Advertising revenues cannot cover the media budgets, even when Google ads are available (the latter account for no more than several thousand euros per year). Some media offer non-typical services, such as PR, organization

of events, maintaining computer networks, and even some kind of wholesale or retail services.

Representatives of public media claimed that to meet their financial plan they are forced to sign contracts with the local municipalities and thus to control the information they produce on local governments. While journalists at public media outlets enjoy guaranteed financing, they suffer from excessive centralization and administrative limits that again place them in a dependent position.

In recent years, more and more advertisers buy internet advertising. However, this trend is quite slow at the regional media level and cannot make up for the increased costs for technological upgrades and maintenance. In most media outlets, hiring of additional staff members is not even discussed as an option.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Public and private national media have sporadic presence in the regions.** In five of Bulgaria’s regions (Lovech, Montana, Pernik, Silistra, and Yambol), there is no local branch of any national media. Thus, regions are barred from taking an adequate role in the informational exchange. Public media should get targeted financing to cover all regions.
- **A considerable part of the regional media does not publish information about their owner, their staff, or the advertising services they offer.** Publication of these data should become the normal practice, and in the future an online registry of all media dedicated to informing the public should be established.
- **Posting of the terms for advertising and information services should be made a legal requirement, along with clear identification of all paid content.**
- To improve their legitimacy and enable communication with their audience, **media should publish data about their staff** on their official sites.
- **Industry associations and specialized nonprofit organizations should monitor the quality of media content** and encourage media and journalists to

create analytical and investigative publications through national rankings and professional awards.

- **Human Resources Development Operational Programme should include measures for targeted additional training of journalists, giving priority to**

journalists working in the regional media. Media associations should look for opportunities for international exchanges of best practices among regional media in the EU, the Balkan, and Danube countries.

ANNEX 1. Sources for the selection of regional media

The following sources were consulted in the selection of regional media for the survey:

- Register of the Ministry of Culture
- Bulgarian Association of Regional Media
- Public media: Bulgarian National TV and Bulgarian National Radio
- Private national media with regional networks, such as Darik Radio, Focus Radio, topnovinite.bg, dnevnik.bg
- Regional TV stations
- Indexes of google.com and bing.com of news by regions in Bulgaria
- Ranking of most popular sites, social media and blogs
- Regional media quoted in national media
- In-depth interviews with media experts

ANNEX 2. List of regional media included in the survey

Blagoevgrad 24	Blagoevgrad
Blagoevgrad news	Blagoevgrad
blagoevgrad.eu	Blagoevgrad
BNR – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
BNT2 – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
BulgariaUtre – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
Darik – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
Focus radio – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
Info mrežha	Blagoevgrad
Struma	Blagoevgrad
Top Novini – Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad
E-79	Blagoevgrad
Bourgas 24	Bourgas
Bourgas dnes i utre	Bourgas
Bourgas info	Bourgas
Bourgas novinite	Bourgas
Bourgas utre	Bourgas
Chernomorski far	Bourgas
Darik – Bourgas	Bourgas
Desant	Bourgas
Flagman.bg	Bourgas
Focus radio – Bourgas	Bourgas
Gramofona	Bourgas
Rakurs	Bourgas
Zona Bourgas	Bourgas
E-bourgas	Bourgas
BNR – Burgas	Burgas
Top Novini – Bourgas	Burgas
BulgariaUtre – Dobrich	Dobrich
Darik – Dobrich	Dobrich
Dobrich Online	Dobrich
Dobrudzhanska Tribuna	Dobrich
Informirash me	Dobrich
Nova dobрудzhanska tribuna	Dobrich
Top Novini – Dobrich	Dobrich
100 Vesti	Gabrovo
Darik – Gabrovo	Gabrovo
Gabrovo dnes	Gabrovo
Globus news	Gabrovo

Sever.bg – Gabrovo	Gabrovo
Top Novini – Gabrovo	Gabrovo
Darik – Haskovo	Haskovo
Haskovska Marica	Haskovo
Marica Haskovo	Haskovo
24 rodipi	Kardzhali
Darik – Kardzhali	Kardzhali
Kardzhali press	Kardzhali
Marica Kardzhali	Kardzhali
Nov Zhivot	Kardzhali
Darik – Kyustendil	Kyustendil
Focus radio – Kyustendil	Kyustendil
Knnews	Kyustendil
Kyuber press	Kyustendil
Nablyudatel	Kyustendil
Lovech dnes	Lovech
News glas – glasat na Lovech	Lovech
Sever.bg – Lovech	Lovech
Zetra – Lovech	Lovech
Montana dnes	Montana
Novinite ot Montana	Montana
Focus radio – Pazardzhik	Pazardzhik
Marica Pazardzhik	Pazardzhik
Telekabel	Pazardzhik
Videlina	Pazardzhik
Zname	Pazardzhik
ipernik	Pernik
Krakra	Pernik
Mirogled	Pernik
PernikToday	Pernik
ZaPernik	Pernik
BulgariaUtre – Pleven	Pleven
Darik – Pleven	Pleven
Obshtinsko radio – Pleven	Pleven
PlevenZaPleven.bg	Pleven
Posoki	Pleven
Sever.bg – Pleven	Pleven
Top Novini – Pleven	Pleven
Zetra – Pleven	Pleven

BNR – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Focus radio – Smolyan	Smolyan
BNT2 – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Marica Smolyan	Smolyan
BulgariaUtre – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Novinite ot Rodopite	Smolyan
Darik – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Rodopchani	Smolyan
Focus radio – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Smolyan dnes	Smolyan
Marica Plovdiv	Plovdiv	BNR – Stara Zagora	Stara Zagora
Plovdiv 24	Plovdiv	BulgariaUtre – Stara Zagora	Stara Zagora
Plovdiv Media	Plovdiv	Darik – Stara Zagora	Stara Zagora
Pod tepeto	Plovdiv	Framar	Stara Zagora
POTV	Plovdiv	Nacionalna biznes poshta	Stara Zagora
Top Novini – Plovdiv	Plovdiv	Stara Zagora info	Stara Zagora
Ekip7	Razgrad	Stara Zagora Novinite dnes	Stara Zagora
Ludogorie – Razgrad	Razgrad	Starozagorski novini	Stara Zagora
RazgradOnline	Razgrad	Starozagortsi	Stara Zagora
Top Novini – Razgrad	Razgrad	Top Novini – Stara Zagora	Stara Zagora
Arena Media	Ruse	Zarata	Stara Zagora
BNT2 – Ruse	Ruse	Targo Media	Targovishte
Bryag Ruse	Ruse	Top Novini – Targovishte	Targovishte
BulgariaUtre – Ruse	Ruse	Afera.bg	Varna
Darik – Ruse	Ruse	BNR – Varna	Varna
Dunav most	Ruse	BNT2 – Varna	Varna
Frontalno	Ruse	BulgariaUtre – Varna	Varna
Ruse info	Ruse	Cherno more	Varna
Sever.bg – Ruse	Ruse	Darik – Varna	Varna
Top Novini – Ruse	Ruse	Dnes Plus	Varna
Utro Ruse	Ruse	Dnevnik – Morski	Varna
BNR – Shumen	Shumen	Focus radio – Varna	Varna
Darik – Shumen	Shumen	Moreto.net	Varna
Focus radio – Shumen	Shumen	Nakratko	Varna
Shum.bg	Shumen	Narodno delo	Varna
Top Novini – Shumen	Shumen	Nova Varna	Varna
Paralel 44	Silistra	Petel.bg	Varna
Silistra dnes	Silistra	Top Novini – Varna	Varna
Silistra.cc	Silistra	Vnews	Varna
Silistrenska tribuna	Silistra	Borba	Veliko Tarnovo
Silistrenski bryag	Silistra	BulgariaUtre – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Darik – Sliven	Sliven	Darik – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Focus radio – Sliven	Sliven	Evrokom Tsarevec	Veliko Tarnovo
Sliven info	Sliven	Focus radio – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Sliven net	Sliven	Obshtinsko radio – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Sliven press	Sliven	Oficialen sait Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Slivenski novini	Sliven	Sever.bg – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
Top Novini – Sliven	Sliven		

Top Novini – Veliko Tarnovo	Veliko Tarnovo
VT novini	Veliko Tarnovo
Yantra dnes	Veliko Tarnovo
BNR – Vidin	Vidin
Focus radio – Vidin	Vidin
Vestnik Nie	Vidin
Vidin press	Vidin
Darik – Vratsa	Vratsa

Konkurent	Vratsa
Shans news	Vratsa
Zov za Istina	Vratsa
Delnik	Yambol
Yambol dnes	Yambol
Yambol press	Yambol
Yambol svyat	Yambol
Zona Yambol	Yambol