

THE MEDIA IN-BETWEEN THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE

The present analysis draws on the empirical findings of a public opinion poll carried out by the Center for the Study of Democracy in May, 1998. It aims at defining the degrees of mass media impact on the Bulgarian society. The emphasis was laid on the ways the relationship has been sustained and regulated between the fourth power and the state. The media independence of the variety of state structures proves a distinctive feature of how developed a civil society is.

The Media and the Civil Society

Bulgarian society is not unanimous on the two key issues -- the civic participation in the media activity and the possibility for the civil society to exercise control over the information offered.

Do you agree with the statement that the media do not reflect as far as they should the opinions of ordinary citizens?

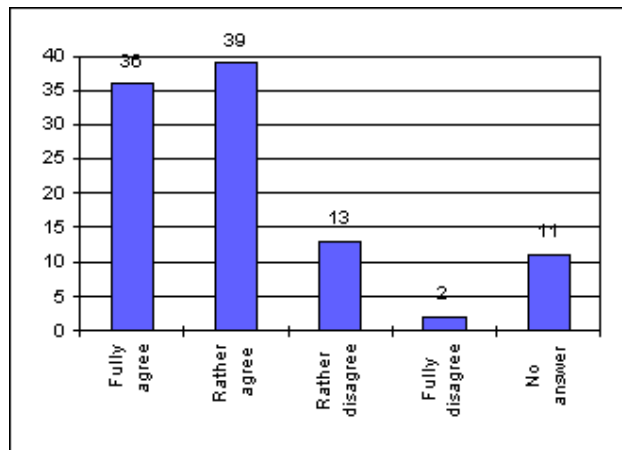
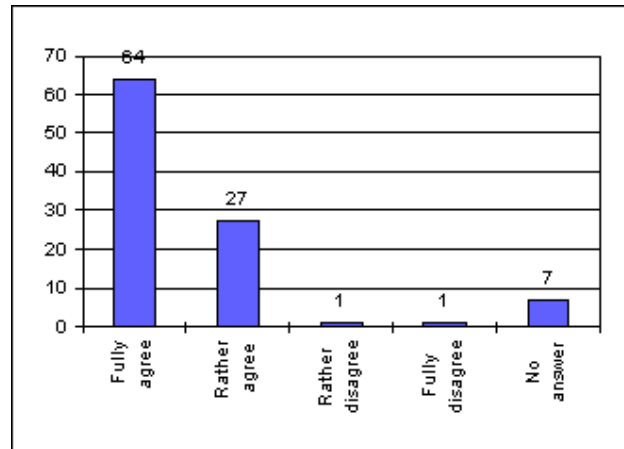


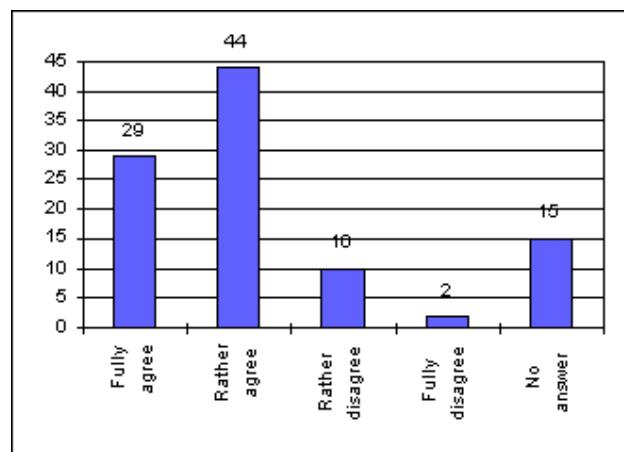
Chart 1 is evidential of how categorical is the public opinion on citizen participation in the media. Over one third of those inquired are of the opinion that the media do not reflect ordinary citizens' opinions in the sufficient degree. Nearly 40% are rather agreed with that. As few as 15% of the respondents take the opposite view. It is the public belief that the necessary conditions are not there for citizens' views to be expressed in the media.

Do you agree with the statement that the radio, the television and the press should be more committed to ordinary citizens' problems?



The survey found that the interaction should be fostered between the civil society and its information structure. Some two thirds of those asked answer in the positive. And another 27% are rather agreed than not with the above assertion. An insignificant 2% would disagree here.

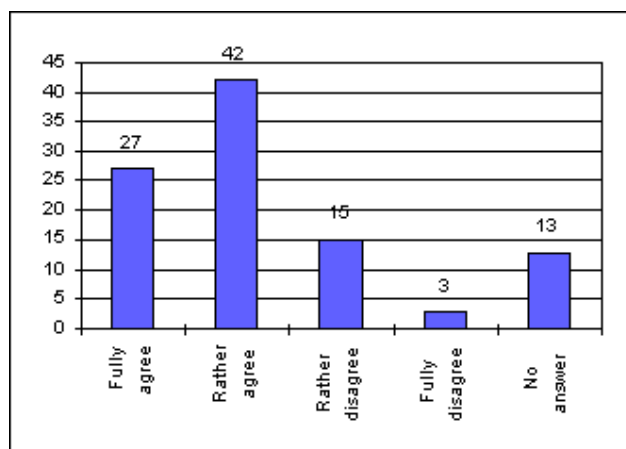
Do you agree that journalists stir up media discussions on specific issues of public concern?



What are the public views on journalists' social mission and professional performance?

On the whole the public opinion is positive about this professional community. The findings demonstrate that the journalists are perceptive about and attentive to civil society problems. Almost one third of the respondents are fully agreed that the journalists do arouse media discussions on concrete issues of public concern and do inform in a timely way about the developments on the most urgent problems. 22% of the citizens are fully convinced that the journalists draw wide circles into discussions. Those who rather agree with the latter three statements comprise an average 40% of all Bulgarians. Unsupportive are as few as 12% and those disagreed -- 18%. The people not sharing the opinion that the journalists involve wide circles in discussions are 23%.

Do you agree that journalists timely inform the public about people's pressing problems?



The survey proved a high degree of transparency and openness of the media to civil society problems. Nonetheless, less transparent zones exist in Bulgarian media performance where citizens are not admitted to participate as corrective.

The public opinion accepts the institutionalization of the journalistic community as an adequate means for its professional development. One out of four agrees that journalists' associations and foundations are helpful in defending their interests. And 21% see them as guarantee and defenders of the freedom of speech in our country. Strikingly enough no negative public attitude has been registered to the variety of organizational forms within the journalistic community. A scarce 4% of those asked are of the opinion that they make it possible for dishonest people to get rich fast. Practically negligible is the share of those asserting that these associations and foundations serve the purposes of money laundering.

By and large the public opinion is extremely tolerant and positive about the journalist community. Journalists getting together guarantees the freedom of speech and constitutes an inalienable human right.

At the same time the public judgment is categorical and stern regarding the sanctions that should be imposed on journalists for offering incorrect information. According to 74% of the respondents incorrect journalist practices should be administratively sanctioned by the employer media. 69% believe that if journalists are proved guilty they should be ordered to pay compensatory damages for what they have inflicted. Over half of the citizens consider the journalists having publicized false information should be sued (including 31% demanding an effective punitive sentence for them). One of three shares that they should be banned from exercising the journalistic profession. And 17% are supportive of the view that they do not need to be punished after they have been publicly compromised.

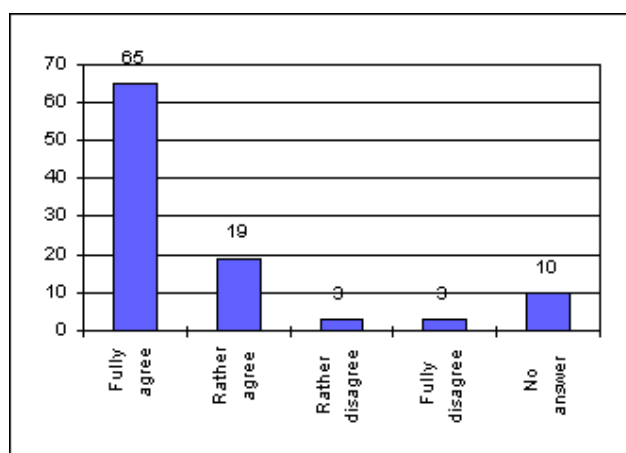
Empirical findings allow for a lot of conclusions to be drawn. It is a public conviction that the media, and the journalists in particular, exert far-reaching influence on what is going on in Bulgarian society. Hence the strictest control is necessary over the quality of the information going public. There are also the civic forms to counteract that. Including the public opinion

itself which accounts for one of the effective social regulators of the journalists' professional performance, as the majority of respondents see it.

The Media and the State Regulation

Another extremely important aspect of public consciousness at work is the manner in which the relationship between the media and the state are being sustained and regulated. The open posing of this problem delineates both the sphere of competent action of the variety of power institutions and the publicly guaranteed range of media independence. The autonomy of the civil society and of its information structure in particular, crucially preconditions the speedy democratization of the country.

Do you agree with the statement that newspapers and magazines should not be banned for political reasons?

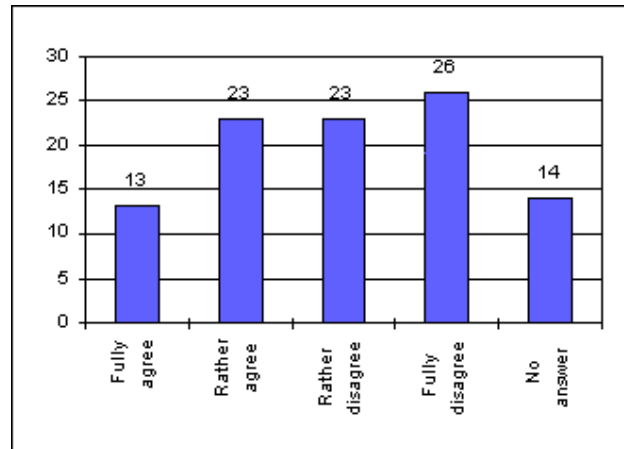


Public opinion appreciates the existing legal guarantees for political freedom in Bulgaria as one of the major achievements of Bulgarian democracy. Clearly expressed is the unanimous and categorical assessment of citizens on that transition period issue. Two thirds of those inquired fully support the assertion that newspapers and magazines should not be banned for political reasons (Chart 5). One out of five is rather agreed with the above statement than not. A scarce 6% adhere to the opposite view. Media independence, the autonomous functioning of the fourth power go doubtlessly supported. According to the majority of Bulgarians it crucially preconditions the objectivity of information on offer.

Widest spread among our citizens -- supported by 40% -- is the opinion that state should facilitate citizen access to media activities, yet the media themselves should create opportunities for this participation. In diametrical opposition to this is the view of quite some Bulgarians. Over one fourth of the respondents claim that it is not at all state's business to deal with issues of this kind. There is a third group -- 13% -- according to whom state must regulate civic access to national newspapers, radio and television.

As is evident the opinions on citizen participation fall into three groups. The first one we can call liberal. It denies even a minimum of state participation in the activity of the media. The second one -- we could define that as etatist -- admits the state as the only mechanism to regulate citizen access to the media. The third one treats state as instrumental; as one of the means facilitating civic participation in media activity.

Do you agree with the statement that government should control the activity of the radio, television and press?

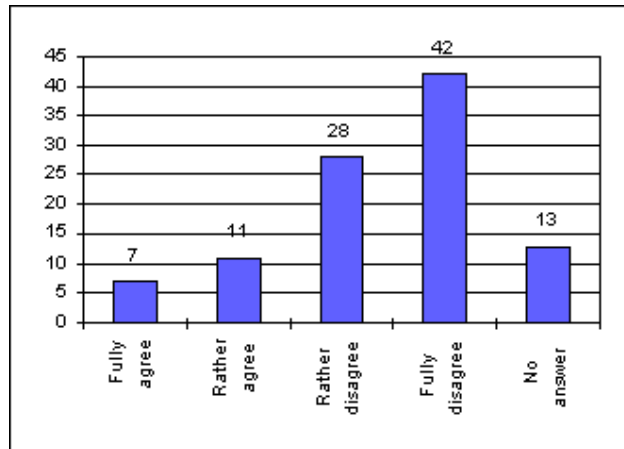


However, when it comes to executive power control on the sources of information in Bulgaria, a substantially different picture emerges. Public consciousness appears intrinsically inconsistent. Two equally weighty opinions have been registered by the survey. On the one hand 49% of respondents think that government should not control the activities of the radio, television, press. On the other hand, however, 36% believe executive power should exert direct influence on them.

This last contradiction is revealing of the understanding of power as structurally and functionally distinct. When moral sides to the issue are brought forward, citizens turn out even more categorically of the opinion that coercion is needed to regulate media activity. 71% of the respondents share (some are fully, some -- partially supportive) the view that the control is needed over the content of the films and magazines to the effect that moral norms are observed. Disagreed are several times fewer -- 18%.

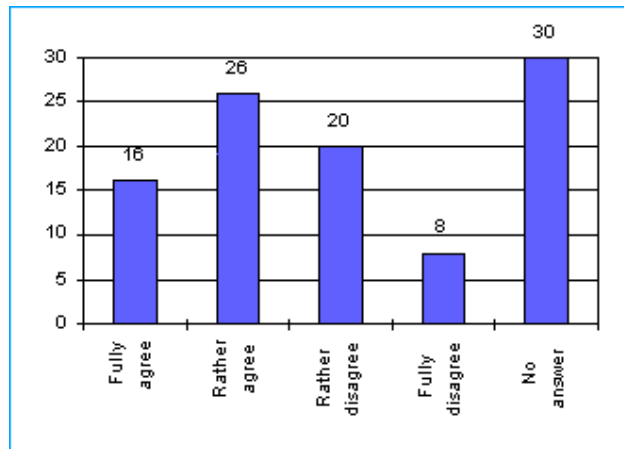
This correlation speaks of how rigid the Bulgarian public notion is of the moral inadequacy of a number of information sources. According to the majority of citizens the activity of the media wants strictest constraints, at least as far as strict rules of professional ethics are concerned.

Do you agree with the statement that the state should be the only owner of the newspapers, radio and television?



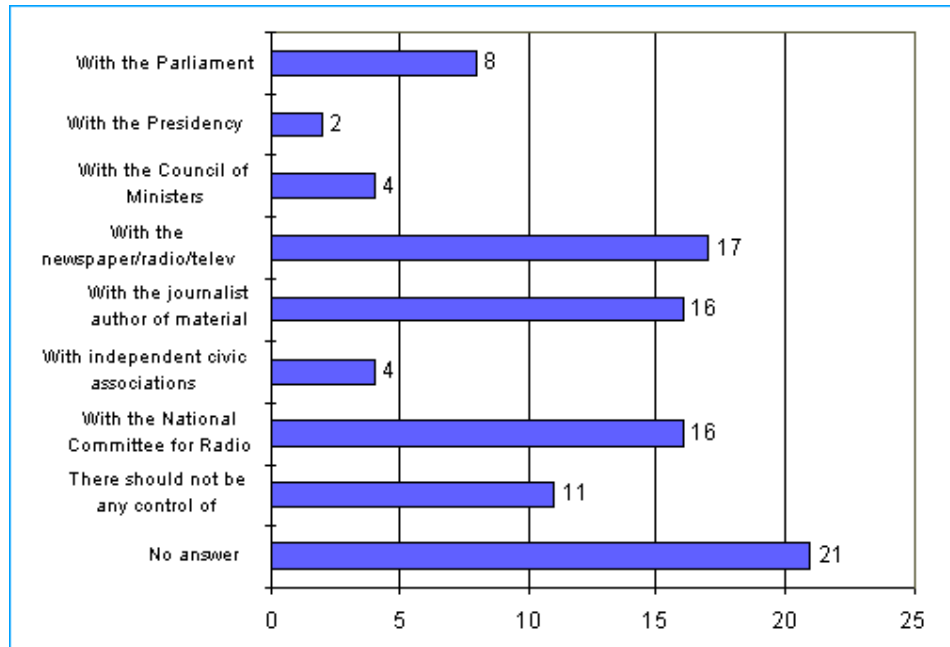
Here, too, the opinions are two, although perceived to different degrees by the public. 60% reject the full state ownership of the information media in Bulgaria. Another 18%, however, consider that the only possibility. This quite substantial part of Bulgarian citizens thus rejects one of the basic principles of capitalist society -- the private ownership over the means of production, including informational ones. They still are the victims of old-time socialist attitudes.

Do you agree with the statement that private mass media are always more objective than state-owned ones?



As to the objectivity of information along the private versus state-owned media axis, public opinion is still further divided. Over one third endorse the idea that private media are more objective than state-owned ones. And vice versa -- 28% are the supporters of the opposite view. Strikingly enough 30% of the citizens are unable to be of one mind on that. For this considerable part of Bulgarian society the form of ownership of an information media does not in itself guarantee its objectivity.

As you see it, with whom should the control rest over the objectivity of information offered in the national newspapers, radio, television?



There is no unanimity on this issue either. Several opinions dominate and they come more or less evenly distributed. According to 17% the control for objectivity should be exercised by the media itself. 16% place the responsibility for that on the journalists themselves who are the authors of materials. For another 16% this is a task to be performed by a government institution -- like the National Committee for Radio and Television. There is a fourth view, countering all the others. 11% of the citizens believe there should not be any control whatsoever of the objectivity of information. This relatively small part of our society is radically-minded. It would not allow for any interference (neither external, nor internal). Information in their view should have its place in the media the way it naturally comes.