

## **Media Non-transparency Research: The Case of Romania**

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*This article presents the results of the latest country-to-country study on media transparency, the data for which were collected in Romania. This research investigated media non-transparency within the larger framework offered by Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2003), and Tsetsura (2005a, b). The goal of the study was to examine problems of media non-transparency by examining media practices in Romania. Specifically, the study explored perceptions and opinions of Romanian media professionals (journalists and public relations practitioners) about non-transparent media practices that occur in a variety of Romanian media outlets.*

*The article provides an overview of the media environment in Romania, describing the development of journalism and public relations professions in this former Soviet bloc country. Then, it reports the results of the survey conducted among Romanian media professionals on the issues of media influences, direct and indirect payments, and media credibility. Overall, 66 journalists and 127 public relations practitioners took part in this study. Participation of Romanian media professionals in the current research was facilitated by the Forum for International Communication, Center for Independent Journalism, and Association of Local Editors of Romania.*

*The study showed that corporate publisher/owners and political affiliation of a media outlet are the biggest influences on Romanian media, as perceived by the surveyed media professionals. Similar to previous investigations (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009; Klyueva, 2008; Tsetsura, 2005b; Tsetsura & Zuo, 2009), the study found that different types of non-transparent practices regularly occur in Romanian media. In many cases, journalists and public relations practitioners agreed on the frequency of occurrence of these practices. Romanian media professionals somewhat often consider acceptance of direct and indirect payments as a normal practice. At the same time, Romanian media professionals do not regard this practice as acceptable.*

*The results of the study also demonstrated that Romanian media professionals often face direct and indirect payments and influences at the workplace. One of the biggest concerns of Romanian media professionals was the failure of the media to disclose information when journalists or editors benefited from the provision of material, financial and technical resources provided by the news sources. Furthermore, the study showed that advertising sales departments of Romanian media frequently influence decisions of editors in terms of what information is published and from what sources. At the same time, Romanian media professionals reported that putting financial pressure on the media from news sources (such as the threat of withdrawal of an advertising contract) is not a routine practice in Romania.*

*When asked about media credibility, Romanian media professionals critically assessed their media system. Both journalists and public relations practitioners agree that all types of Romanian media are less credible than foreign news sources. Moreover, a majority of journalists (51.6%) and many public relations practitioners (41.5%) acknowledged the existence of information service contracts with media outlets to provide media coverage. Finally, respondents believed that direct and indirect payments and influences are the big problem in local and regional media as well as in the national media, which is contrary to the previous findings in Poland (Tsetsura, 2005b) that showed a significant difference between local and national media non-transparency.*

*Although the respondents in this study generally agreed that accepting payments from news sources is a common practice in Romania, both journalists and public relations practitioners disagreed that accepting payments for news coverage is professional. This was consistent with findings in other countries, such as Poland and Ukraine (Tsetsura, 2005b; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). These results illuminated the importance of continuous discussions among media and public relations practitioners about professional standards and responsibilities in relation to news coverage.*

*In general, this study continues to draw attention to the problems of media transparency around the world. Despite the existing geographical differences in findings, the fundamental issue of media non-transparency remains unresolved. Media professionals need to pay more attention to the problems of the media in countries with transitional democracies like Romania. This report provides a basis for journalistic and public relations professional organizations in Romania to initiate active discussions about establishing and following the professional and ethical standards and provides support for reinforcing codes and standards of ethics among both journalists and public relations practitioners who practice media relations in Romania.*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first research on media transparency was conducted in 2003. Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2003) developed an index that ranks 66 of the world's nations for the likelihood that print journalists will seek or accept cash for news coverage from government officials, businesses, or other news sources. Bribery of the media, according to their study, is most likely to occur in China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. By contrast, those countries with the best ratings for avoiding such practices are Finland (first place); Denmark, New Zealand and Switzerland (tied for second place); Germany, Iceland, and the United Kingdom (tied for third place); Norway, Austria, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium (tied for fourth place); and the United States (fifth place) (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003).

The aforementioned project was developed as a part of a campaign for media transparency, initiated by the Institute for Public Relations and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA, 2004), and aimed to attract public attention and to fight

against media non-transparency around the world. In 2004, six global organizations announced their support for a set of principles designed to foster greater transparency in the dealings between public relations professionals and the media and to end bribery for media coverage throughout the world. These organizations are the International Press Institute, the International Federation of Journalists, Transparency International, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management, the Institute for Public Relations, and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA, 2004).

The first research on media transparency (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003) used secondary data and identified the likelihood of the existence of problems with media transparency in a certain country based on eight different determinants. The results of this project have generated a lot of attention from media professionals around the world and facilitated a line of country-based studies that examined media transparency with the first-hand data. The research on media transparency (Klyueva, 2008; Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003; Kruckeberg, Tsetsura, & Ovaitt, 2005; Tsetsura, 2005a, b; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009; Tsetsura & Zuo, 2009) has been conducted in four countries so far: Russia, China, Ukraine, and Poland.

Most of these studies were examined through the framework developed by Tsetsura (2005b), who argued that cash for news coverage is just one side of the problem. Tsetsura has researched the phenomenon within two possible dimensions of media transparency, (1) direct and indirect payments and influences, and (2) different types of media. Direct payments were defined as cash or other monetary payments for news coverage (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). Indirect payments and influences were defined as “any type of non-monetary reward to a journalist, editor, or media outlet or the existence of a media policy which dictates, encourages indirect payments or influences the financial success and independence of the media outlet or its employees” (Tsetsura, 2005b, p. 15).

An indirect payment is a more complicated phenomenon because it can take any imaginable form. Because of the study, Tsetsura (2005b) developed the following classification of the types of indirect payments and influences.

They were

- (1) publication or production of materials in exchange for paid advertising,
- (2) written media rules of conduct that allow the receipt of samples, free gifts or attractively discounted items from third parties to media representatives,
- (3) conflict of interests when a journalist is employed with media and a company, institution, government, or public relations agency,
- (4) pressure from the advertising departments of media on editors in regards to which news from which sources to cover, and
- (5) financial and psychological pressures from news sources, companies, and public relations agencies on the media to present information that comes from them.

Later, a global study of media practices demonstrated that these influences could be found in media relations practices in most countries around the world (Tsetsura, 2008).

The global study also demonstrated that, although media professionals around the world, who are members of the international professional public relations and journalism associations, reported that different types of non-transparent media practices happen in their countries, the vast majority of these professionals personally disagreed or strongly disagreed that these practices are acceptable. The results of previous studies also showed that media professionals in Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Ukraine, condemned non-transparent media practices and called for active discussions among journalists and public relations practitioners to reinforce established codes of ethical conduct in journalism and public relations (Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). These previous studies have revealed that practitioners in these European countries agreed that these practices are neither professional nor ethical.

This study continues the media transparency research project by examining

- (1) what the Romanian media practitioners perceive as influences on the media in Romania;
- (2) the frequency of occurrence of previously identified direct and indirect influences in the Romanian context;
- (3) the extent to which the difference of media non-transparent practices exists between national and local media in Romania; and
- (4) whether Romanian professionals find these non-transparent media practices acceptable.

Next, this report examines the context in which Romanian journalism and public relations have developed.

## **Journalism in Romania**

Since the fall of communism and disintegration of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, newly created democratic states have faced the challenge of creating a functioning civil society. One of the intrinsic elements of civil society was the emergence of free press in the post-communist countries, including Romania. The emergence of free press has led to the birth of a new professional body of media professionals in Romania (Coman, 2004). According to Petcu (2000), in 1989 there were roughly two thousand accredited journalists in Romania. By 1992 the Journalists' Society of Romania had around seven thousands members, and by 2000 this number had grown to 20 thousand members.

Coman (2004) described the Romanian press as having an uncertain identity, being a prisoner of romantic ideals, and striving for creation of Romanian national identity. Throughout its relatively short history, Romanian media has been characterized by a strong "intellectual aura" (Coman, p. 46) and with aspiration to assert its own profession. The conflicting identity of the free press in Romania has jammed journalistic profession between political affiliations, high intellectual claims, and cheap sensationalism (Coman, 2004). Coman offered a general profile of a post-communism journalist in Romania, characterizing him or her as "young, coming into the media after the 1989 revolution, usually having done higher education (but in various domains), trained by working in

editorial offices, with a fairly high professional mobility, performing especially newsgathering, or (re)writing, but with little confidence in the credibility of the press” (p. 50).

Due to its historical heritage, Romanian journalism has always been characterized by weak professional culture and ambiguous identity. Journalism in Romania very often is seen as a hobby or pursuit rather than a legitimate profession. Coman (2004) explained the journalism identity crisis starts with the lack of professional education in Romania, where journalistic training is mostly conducted "on-site" within the news room and not in educational institutions. According to Gross (1996), Romanian media professionals emphasize direct experience in news rooms, learning that is based on the reproduction of activities and duties of those who worked there before. Gross explained this is due to the lack of professional education that is offered at the university levels. Therefore, many journalists are self-taught and receive their professional education on the job, through trial and error.

Scholars (Coman, 2004; Gross, 1996) reported that many Romanian journalists do not make conscious choices regarding their choice of the profession. According to Zarojanu (2001), in the wake of the creation of free and independent press in Romania many journalists came to the profession not because they had a talent or aspiration for this, but because of their personal connections to editors or journalists. With the creation of formal educational institutions in the 1990s this situation started to change.

The open nature of the journalistic profession created the impression that everyone had an equal opportunity to work in the media. However, according to Coman (2004), the hiring procedures in the Romanian media are almost completely at the discretion of the editor, with newcomers treated particularly in a purely exploitative way. One of the reasons why more and more young people in Romania have been drawn to the profession is the larger income that the media offered in the beginning of the 1990s (Gross, 1996). However, journalistic salaries decreased dramatically in the following years, leaving a significant gap in earnings between journalists and their editors, whom Coman (2004) called media proletariat and media bourgeoisie respectively. Reportedly, the salary of the editor-in-chief is 10 times more than that of a journalist.

The decreased journalistic salaries forced many Romanian media professionals to seek additional forms of income. Coman (2004) described how Romanian journalists enhance their monthly earnings. First, journalists work on additional news stories after exceeding the established monthly number of articles. Second, a journalist can earn an extra buck by soliciting advertising contracts for a 10% commission to local businesses. This practice is particularly frequent during the election campaigns when journalists make "open offers to various political personalities either to buy commercial space/broadcast time or to transform the prospective article or broadcast into thinly veiled advertising" (p. 53).

The need for income enhancement suggests the lack of standards for professional ethics in Romania. Building his argument on the case of Romania, Starck (1999)

described journalistic ethics in transitional societies as problematic. He suggested that essential human needs, economic viability and simply necessary materials come first rather than considerations of ethics. Specifically, Starck (1999) raises the question: “without having established a professional base, can journalists be expected to be ethically aware of what they are doing, or is it at this early stage of development that journalists most especially are in a position to create an ethical consciousness that provides a foundation for the future of the press?” (p. 29).

Starck (1999) suggested the transitional period or period of institutionalization in newly created democratic societies does not exactly represent the most hospitable environment for implementing ethical behavior. A similar proposition is offered by Gross (1996), who argues that the lack of historical or professional role models for Romanian journalists, lack of education, conflicted identity, and unclear definition of the journalist’s and journalism’s role in the society places Romanian journalists in a continuous ethical crisis. This situation is worsened by the perpetual financial crisis of Romanian media, when the majority of journalists receive low pay, particularly in the local and provincial media (Gross, 1996).

As a result, the unstable financial situation in Romanian media tainted the development of journalism as a profession. In the search for better pay, Romanian journalists were forced to migrate from one job to another, working for different types of media institutions. Gross (1996) argued that switching jobs between broadcasting, print, and tabloid journalism does not allow for establishing clear professional journalistic styles. Moreover, the poor technological set up of the Romanian media, lack of transportation, and lack of resources for quick and timely news delivery also contribute to the delay in professional development. Therefore, the environment in which Romanian journalists function affects the way they practice journalism, inviting the discussion about the nature of media transparency in Romania.

## **The Development of Public Relations in Romania**

The profession of public relations in Romania has formed in the same environment as Romanian journalism. Public relations is a relatively new professional field in Romania, having only been practiced for the last fifteen years (Rogojinaru, 2009). As in many countries with transitional democracies, the development of Romanian public relations was characterized by a state of uncertainty. The very first public relations practices were mostly in a form of publicity and had little resemblance with the modern practice of public relations. The strategic role of public relations became more visible during the last five years when public relations agencies started to include strategic counseling and crisis management in their agency’s portfolios (Rogojinaru, 2009).

Overall, the development of public relations in Romanian can be described in three distinct phases:

- (1) the pioneer phase of public relations (1990-1995),
- (2) the exploratory phase (1995-2000), and
- (3) the consolidation phase (2000-current).

Romanian public relations practice during the pioneer phase was characterized mostly by publicity and promotional events. During this time the very first publicity-based agencies were established, first public relations courses were offered at the universities, and the academic degree in public relations was launched at the University of Bucharest. The exploratory stage of Romanian public relations introduced public relations as a professional practice, incorporating research into the practice of public relations. At that time, the Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals was established, which facilitated the acknowledgement of the strategic role of public relations. Finally, during the consolidation phase, the first survey on public relations usage and attitudes was conducted and several initiatives on accreditation of public relations practitioners were launched (Rogojinaru, 2009).

The ethical conduct of public relations in Romania is one the burgeoning discussions among Romanian public relations professionals. The ethical facets of public relations are discussed and regulated by such professional bodies as Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals (ARRP) or Club of Public Relations Companies (CCRP). Rogojinaru (2009) reported that public relations practitioners used to be rather discreet about their ethical conduct, propagating the idea that practice dictates the conduct. In recent years, however, more debates on public relations ethics became open, particularly those concerned with the treatment of news and media relations. According to Rogojinaru, there are still practitioners that consider paid publicity an effective public relations technique.

The problem of paid publicity brings the issue of the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners to the forefront of this study. In general, the development of journalism and public relations practice in Romania occurred in the same environment. Both professions faced ethical dilemmas that affected their every day practice and transparency of the media. The next section restates the goals of this study and introduces the research questions.

## **Goals of the Study**

The overall goal of this study was to collect the first-hand data on the status of media bribery and direct and indirect payments and influences in modern Romania. The study aimed to gather information on the existence of the phenomenon in different areas of Romanian journalism and tried to identify the factors that might influence its existence in Romanian PR practice.

## Research Questions

The current study researched opinions of media professionals about the problem of direct and indirect payments and influences in the relationship between Romanian journalists and public relations practitioners.

Specifically, the study wanted to answer the following questions:

*RQ1: What do Romanian media professionals perceive as being an influence on media practices in Romania?*

*RQ2: In what form do direct or indirect payments and influences exist in Romania?*

*RQ3: Are Romanian media on the national, regional, and local levels considered credible in the eyes of media professionals of this country?*

*RQ4: If any forms of the direct and indirect payments and influences exist in Romania, are they viewed as acceptable by media professionals?*

## METHOD

### Study Population

The study population was restricted to media professionals who work in Romania. For the purpose of this study, media professionals were defined as journalists and public relations practitioners. The journalist sample included, but was not limited to, reporters, editors, and television news anchors of the regional and local mass media outlets. The public relations practitioner sample was represented by the employees of private and public organizations, government, and public relations agencies in Romania.

### Sampling

To explore media relations practices and the phenomenon of media transparency in Romania, a census of all available journalists and public relations practitioners was sought. The sampling frame of Romanian media professionals was developed and implemented using the Forum for International Communication, Center for Independent Journalism, and Association of Local Editors (Romania). Overall, 1,800 participants (800 journalists and 1000 public relations practitioners) were included in the mailing list.

## **Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

A total of 193 responses were received with an overall response rate of 10.7 %. The response rate for public relations practitioners constituted 12.7%, but the response rate for journalists was only 8.2%. The majority of the 193 respondents indicated that they have at least a bachelor's degree (50%, n = 96) and/or master's degree (34%, n = 66). An overwhelming majority of respondents were women (68%, n = 122). Men constituted only 32% (n = 56) of the respondents. Among public relations practitioners who reported their gender, 92 (78.6%) were women and 25(21.4%) were men. Among journalists who responded to this question, 30 (49.2%) were females, and 31 (50.8%) were males. Overall, respondents had an average of seven years of professional experience (ranging from 1 year to 40 years of experience) and their average age was 33 (ranging from 20 to 61).

## **Survey Design**

The study used an updated version of the survey designed by Tsetsura (2005b) to collect data on global media practices and media transparency in Poland. Survey questions were constructed to explore the phenomenon across two dimensions: frequency of non-transparent media practice and different types of media. The study identified eleven different types of media outlets that exist in Romania:

- (1) national newspaper,
- (2) national magazine,
- (3) national information agency,
- (4) national TV programming,
- (5) national radio programming,
- (6) local and regional newspaper,
- (7) local and regional magazine,
- (8) local and regional information agency,
- (9) local and regional TV programming,
- (10) local and regional radio programming and
- (11) website.

Respondents were asked to record the frequency of non-transparent practices occurring in each of the identified media along a five-point semantic differential scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). For example, "A news release that is not newsworthy appears in a publication in exchange for a paid advertisement placed in the same publication." Statement responses were coded so that the higher value indicated support for the stated concept, meaning that the media is less transparent. Therefore, some questions of the survey were reverse coded for logic. In addition, most of the survey questions included a box for an open-ended response. The completed survey was translated into Romanian, back translated into English, and checked for accuracy before distribution.

## **Data Gathering and Data Analysis**

After receiving IRB approval to conduct this study, the data was collected in the spring and summer of 2009 using specifically designed online survey software. The four-step distribution process was used, and letters of invitation were sent to all potential participants once a week over the four-week period. The follow-up correspondence was conducted in accordance with Dilman's (1978) recommendations, who argued that this method allows the researchers to maximize the response rate. The survey results were analyzed using the statistical software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0). The collected data was processed and analyzed using primarily descriptive statistics and a series of t-tests.

## **Results and Discussion**

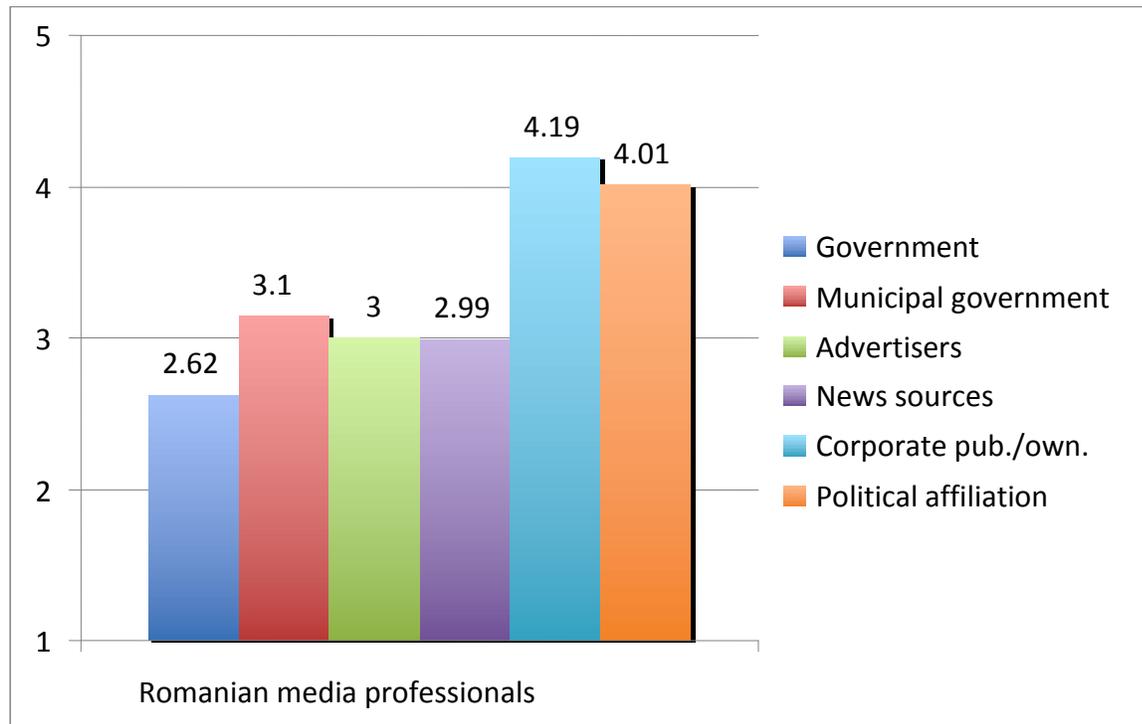
The goals of this study were to examine non-transparent media practices in Romania. In general, Romanian media professionals were willing to share their perceptions and opinion about media practices, influences on the media, and direct and indirect payments. This section first discusses factors that influence media practices in Romania as perceived by Romanian media professionals. Then, the description of different direct and indirect payments and influences will be presented, followed by the discussion of whether these practices are viewed as acceptable by Romanian media professionals.

### **Influences on Media**

*RQ1: What do Romanian media professionals perceive as being an influence on media practices in Romania?*

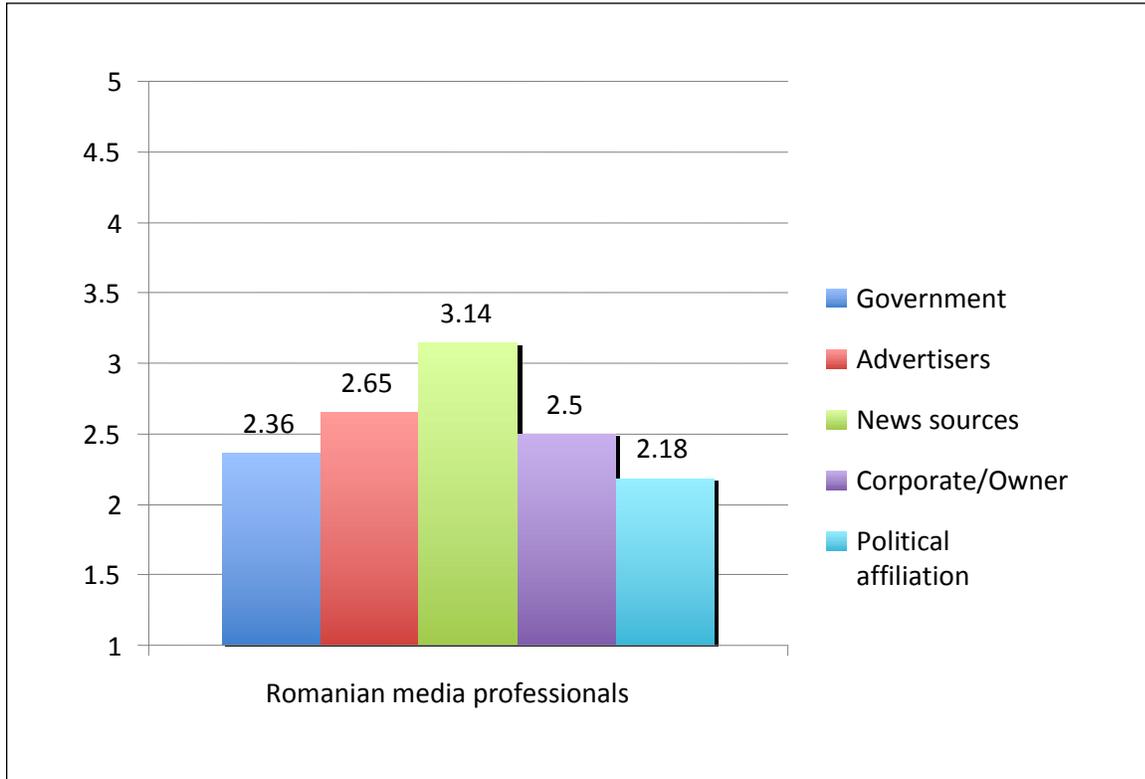
Answering research question one about what influences media practices in Romania, it appears that Romanian media professionals believe that a corporate owner and/or publisher has the biggest influence over the media ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = .876$ ). This finding is consistent with previous studies on media transparency. For example, in Russia, corporate ownership was also considered as the biggest influence on the media. Interestingly enough, in the open-ended responses, Romanian media professionals particularly expressed their concern that this situation is flourishing in the local media. According to one respondent, "Most of the times, the ownership has an effect of the political pressure. I am talking here especially about the local media." Another respondent put the situation in a more specific context: "Financing sources, which are, too often, public institutions used by politicians that rule them in order to improve their image. The most severe situation exists in the local media, where some media channels are financed this way up to 99%."

Table 1. Influences on the media as perceived by Romanian media professionals (N=190)



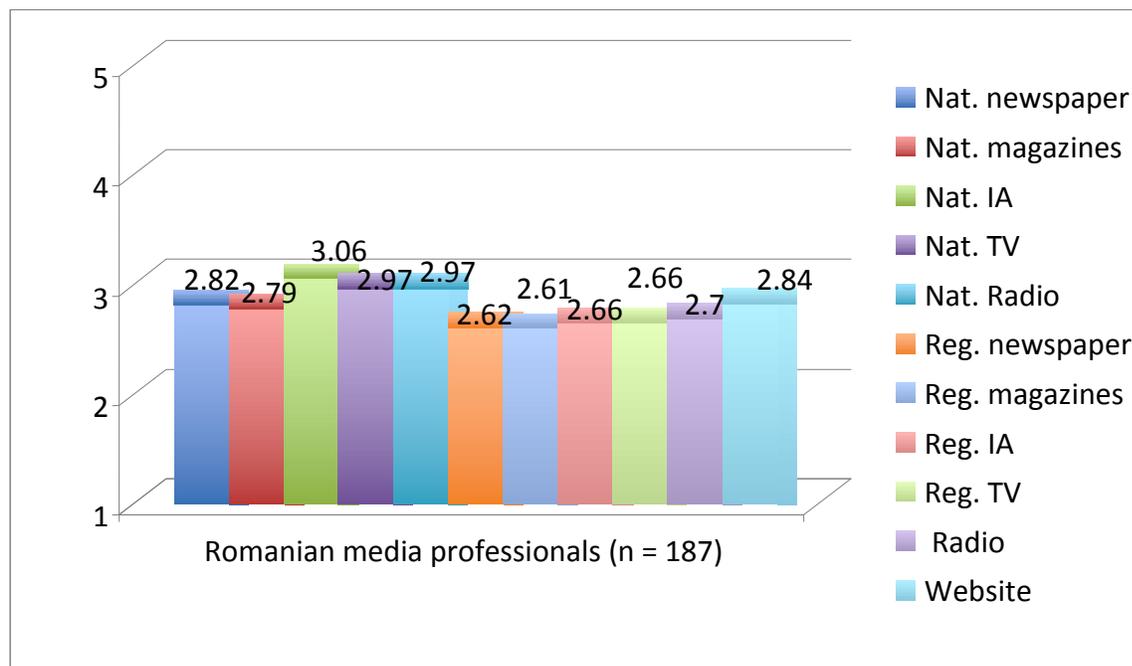
The second greatest influence on the media was identified by Romanian media professionals as political affiliation of the media (M = 4.01, SD = .926, see Table 1). This indicates that political preferences of the media owner can be manifested in the content of the media. When asked whether the national or municipal local government in Romania influences media in any way, the responses of Romanian media professionals indicated that municipal government (M = 3.14, SD = 1.090) is perceived to have a greater influence on the media than national government (M = 2.62, SD = .972). The Romanian media professionals were ambivalent to declare that advertisers (M = 3.00, SD = .965) or news sources such as public relations practitioners (M = 2.99, SD = 1.023) have any influence on the media. The analysis of opinions of journalists and public relations practitioners did not reveal any differences in perceptions on this matter.

Table 2. *I believe that media outlet can still be credible even if it is influenced by* (N=190)



When asked whether Romanian media can still be considered credible even if influenced by different constituencies, the majority of respondents disagree (see Table 2). Both journalists and public relations practitioners believe that media cannot be credible when influenced by government ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.081$ ), advertisers ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.048$ ), corporate owners ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.142$ ), and political affiliation ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.167$ ). Only influences of the news sources, such as public relations practitioners ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.108$ ) were considered relatively harmless to media truthfulness and objectivity.

Table 3. Compared with similar media in other countries, the credibility of the media in Romania is highest (N=187)



When asked whether the credibility of the Romanian media is high in comparison with the media in other countries, Romanian media professionals disagreed. Both local and national media lacked credibility in the eyes of Romanian journalists and public relations practitioners (see Table 3). The analysis of the opinions of journalists and public relations practitioners did not reveal any differences in perceptions on this matter.

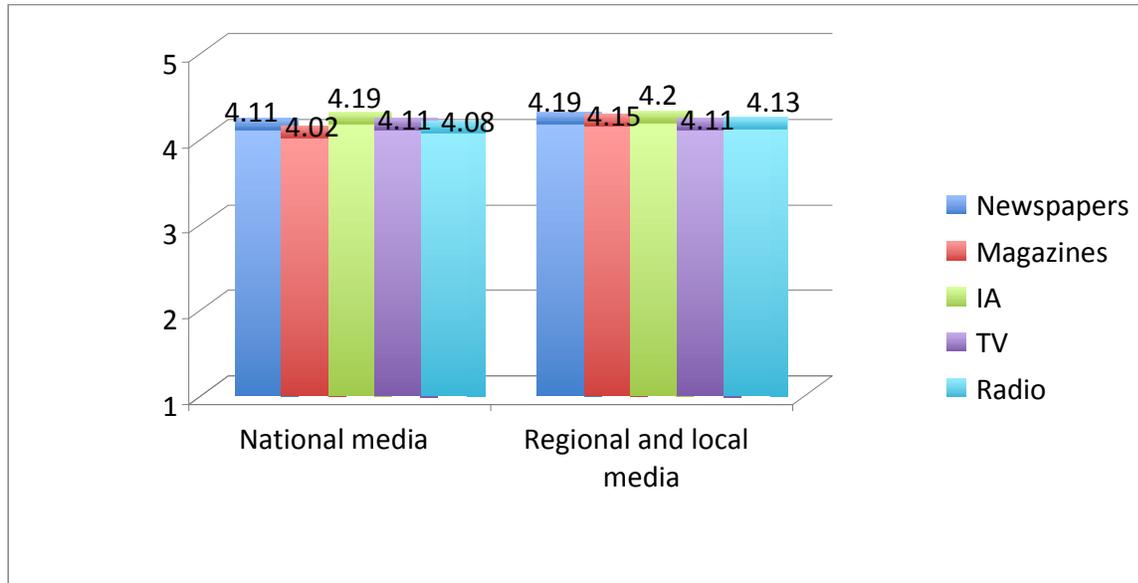
### Direct and Indirect Payments and Influences and Differences among National, Regional, and Local Media in Romania

RQ2: In what form do direct or indirect payments and influences exist in Romania?

RQ3: Are Romanian media on the national, regional, and local levels considered credible in the eyes of media professionals of this country?

To answer the next two research questions, researchers considered two dimensions. First, the type of media outlet was assessed: national media or local and regional media, and second, the specific types of non-transparent media practices were examined. The results of this study revealed that a number of non-transparent media practices are present in the Romanian media. The most frequently occurring practice was identified as material provisions in a form of free samples, free hotel stay, and transportation to journalists or editors from news sources (see Table 4). It appears this practice is equally present in the national and regional media.

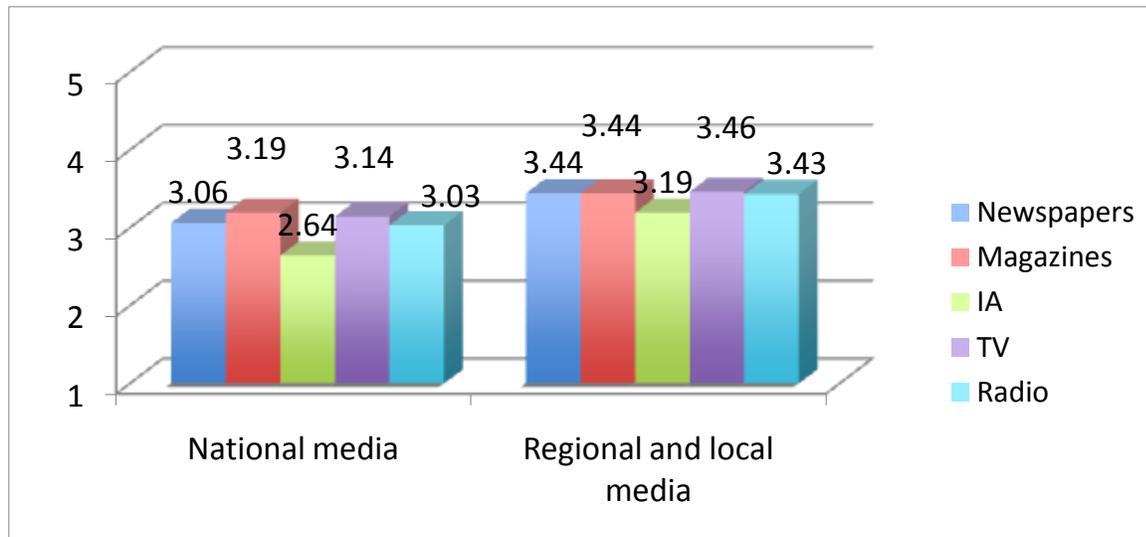
*Table 4. When a journalist or an editor has benefited from the provision of a product or service, such as a hotel stay, this is NOT clearly stated in the article (N=189)*



About half of all respondents reported that journalists rarely state in the articles that they have received any benefits or products and services from a company featured in the article. A respondent from the public relations group reported that this is indeed a frequent practice in Romanian media: “When journalists had to reach another location than the one in the city in which we usually organize the events, our clients pay for their transportation. This information is not included in the materials published afterwards.” Journalists also acknowledged this practice, yet very often refer to another person’s experience rather than their own, “Personally, I’ve never written such a thing, but I’ve seen this practice with other colleagues of mine. For example, when a journalist is housed at a mountain lodge to cover international delegations, sometimes he or she does a kind of unofficial ‘barter,’ meaning the journalist does not pay for housing but writes something about the respective lodge.”

The second most frequent non-transparent media practice in Romania is when advertising sales departments influence decisions of editors in terms of which news will get published and from what sources (see Table 5). This practice was reported to occur most frequently in regional and local television programming (M = 3.46, SD = 1.188), followed by regional and local newspapers (M = 3.44, SD = 1.145), regional and local magazines (M = 3.44, SD = 1.150), regional and local radio (M = 3.43, SD = 1.154), regional and local information agencies (M = 3.19, SD = 1.206), and national magazines (M = 3.19, SD = 1.171).

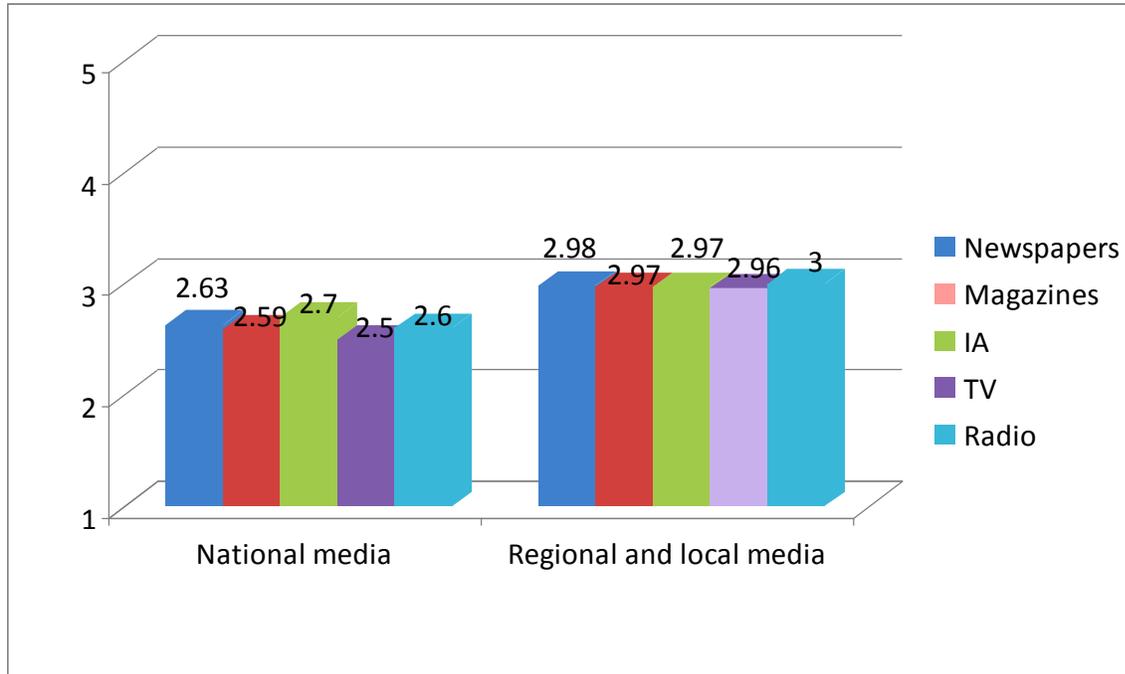
*Table 5. An advertising sales department of a media outlet influences decisions of editors in terms of which news from which sources gets covered (N=187)*



According to the respondents, this practice occurs least often in the national information agencies ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 1.225$ ) and national newspapers ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.132$ ). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between all types of local and national media ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that advertising sales departments attempt to influence editorial decisions more frequently in the local and regional media than in the national media.

When asked whether paid materials are identified as such in Romanian media, the answers of both journalists and public relations practitioners were ambivalent (see Table 6). However, in the responses it was evident that Romanian media professionals believe that when this practice happens, it happens more often in the local and regional media and less in the national media ( $p < .001$ ). National television programming was identified as the medium that broadcasts paid materials without clear marking least often ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.153$ ).

Table 6. Material which appears in print or on air as a result of direct payment is NOT clearly identified as advertising or paid-for-promotion and IS disguised as editorial (N=190)



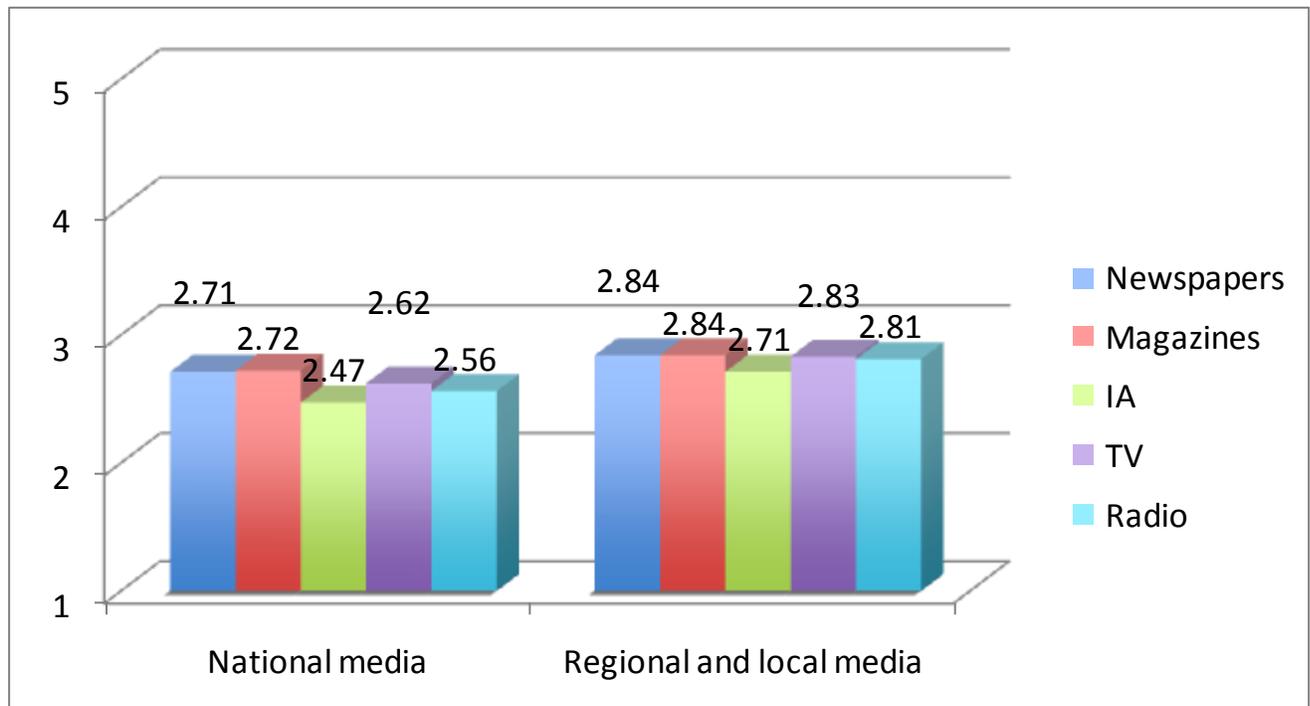
Respondents willingly shared their experiences on this issue. For example, a public relations practitioner described how he deals with it: “The advertorials we pay for are marked as ‘promo’ or ‘advertorial’ and are bought through the media agency... Another practice is content integration, especially in online media, but here the editor is the one that uses information according to the site's rules...” While explaining how they deal with the issue of paid-for publicity, public relations practitioners complained that very often media themselves solicit paid materials from news sources: “We often receive ‘advertising’ offers from local TV channels, consisting of invitations to participate in talk-shows or other TV shows, but we need to pay for participating in them.” Due to the difficult financial situation in Romanian media, this type of advertising solicitation is a common way of earning money by the media. Romanian journalists acknowledge this problem as well:

I worked for a local paper, and the editor-in-chief used to send me to write articles about the recently opened stores in town. The purpose: free publicity in the first issue and then an advertising contract. I realized that through this method the editor made these businessmen feel obliged to sign an advertising contract with the newspaper.

The other side of the paid-for publicity is when the advertising material is produced to look like a regular news article. Both journalists and public relations practitioners were uncertain how often this practice happens in the Romanian media. National radio (M =

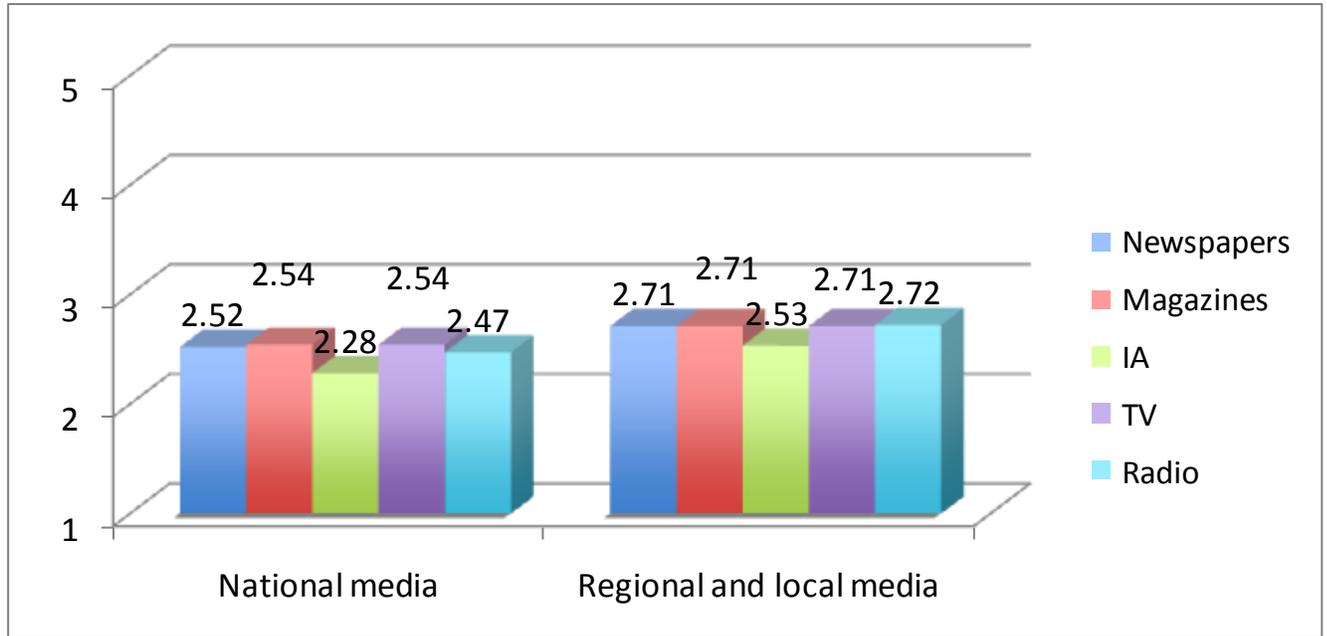
2.56, SD = 1.141) and national television (M = 2.62, SD = 1.204) were identified as media that perform this practice least often (see Table 7). However, analysis of responses indicated that respondents believe that when this practice happens it happens more often in the local and regional information agencies (M = 2.71, SD = 1.253,  $p = .001$ ), local and regional television (M = 2.83, SD = 1.302,  $p = .001$ ) and radio (M = 2.81, SD = 1.257,  $p = .001$ ).

Table 7. An advertisement is produced to look like a regular article or program and there is nothing that clearly informs the reader that the message has been paid for (N=189)



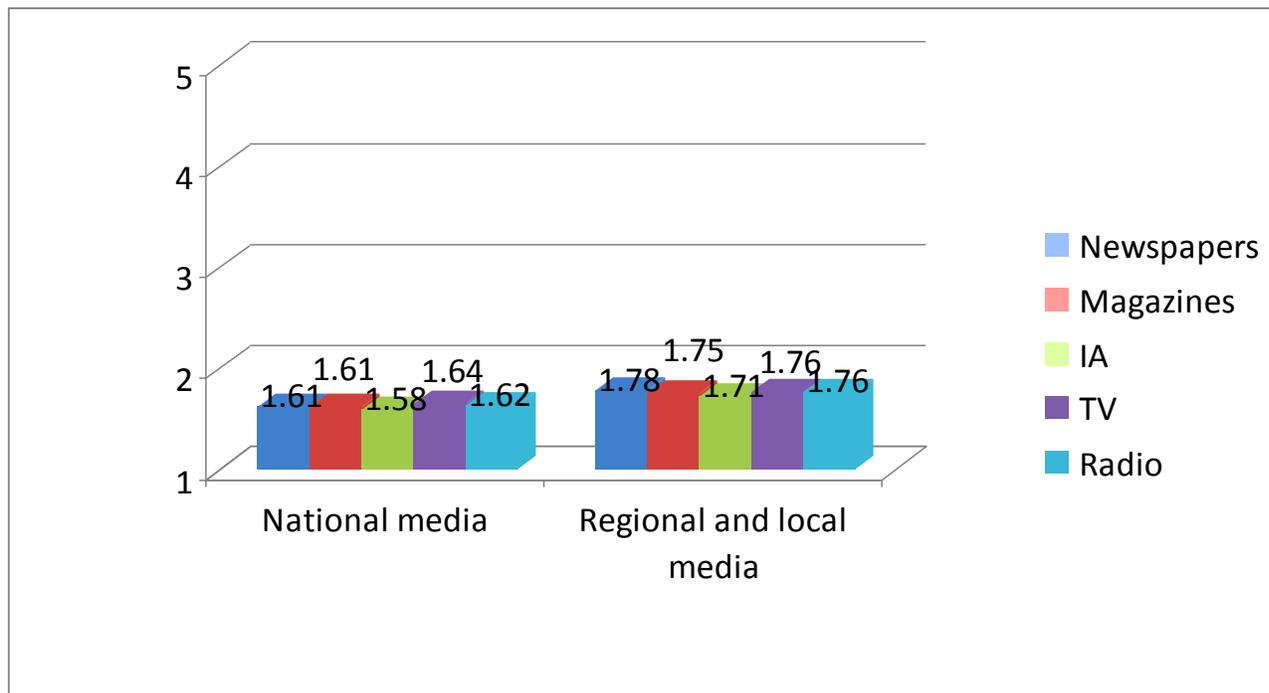
When asked whether news sources put financial pressure on the media (such as withholding advertising contract, government subsidies) to influence media news judgment, respondents reported that financial pressures on the media rarely happen in Romania (see Table 8). This practice reportedly happens least often in the information news agencies, both local (M = 2.53, SD = 1.271) and national (M = 2.28, SD = 1.186). However, responses of the Romanian media professionals indicated that this practice happens more often in all types of the local and regional media than in the national ( $p < .001$ ). The difference in responses between groups was observed. Particularly, journalists reported that these pressures happen more often (in contrast with PR practitioners), as journalists most likely face these pressures in their everyday activities.

Table 8. News sources put financial pressure on the media (such as withholding advertising contracts, government subsidies) to influence media’s news judgment (N=187)



Finally, Romanian media professionals were in agreement regarding whether news sources put any physical pressure on the media in order to influence their news judgments. A majority of respondents indicated that media almost never get pressured with threats of physical harm (see Table 9). Nevertheless, in cases when this practice happens, it is perceived to happen more often in the local media than in the national ( $p < .001$ ).

Table 9. News sources put physical pressure on the media (such as physical harm, threats) to influence media's news judgment (N=187)



Overall, the results showed that non-transparent media practices were perceived to happen more often in the local and regional media than in the national media. This can be explained by the unequal distribution of financial resources and regional development in Romania. Similar phenomena were found in Poland, Russia and China, which allows the researchers to conclude that this is one of the features of media development in countries with transitional democracies and economies.

### Acceptance of Non-transparent Practices by Media Professionals in Romania

*RQ4: If any forms of the direct and indirect payments and influences exist in Romania, are they viewed as acceptable by media professionals?*

Despite the fact that non-transparent media practices are considered not acceptable by a significant part of Romanian media professionals (43%), there are still a number of journalists (16%) and public relations practitioners (18%) that do agree that this practice is acceptable (see Tables 10 & 11). Only a very small fraction of respondents (5 journalists and 9 practitioners) personally strongly agreed that this practice is acceptable. This finding may suggest that payments for news coverage are not a cultural particularity of doing media relations in Romania but rather an outlier and a deviation from the norm. This finding also suggests that professional organizations and

associations in Romania need to continue discussions about ethical standards and practices of news coverage.

Table 10. *I personally agree that this practice is acceptable (N=179)*

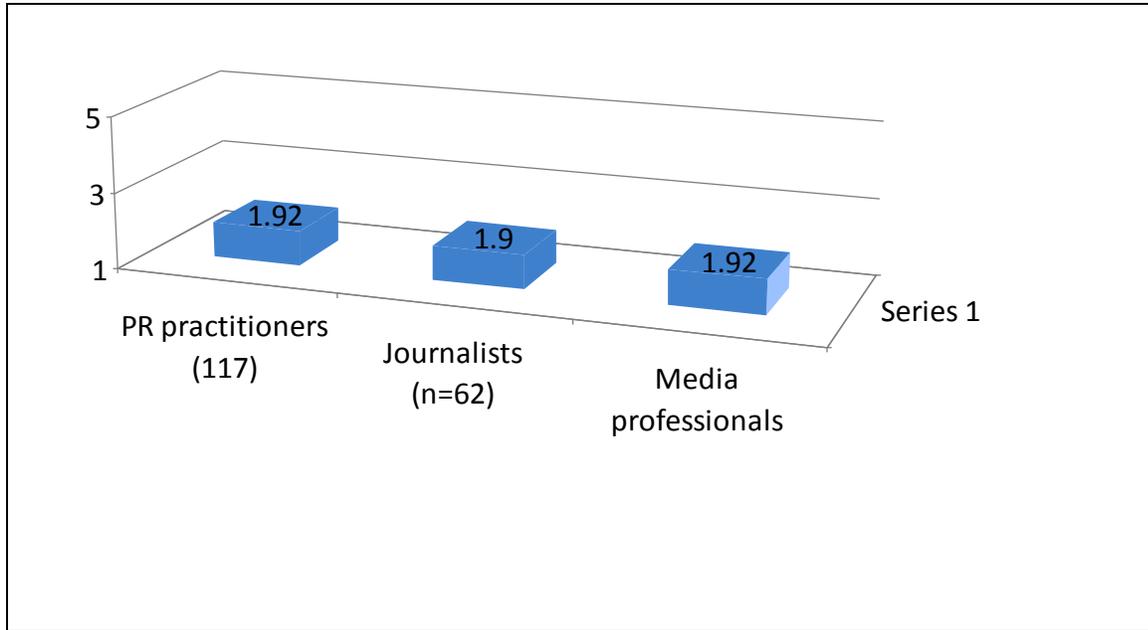
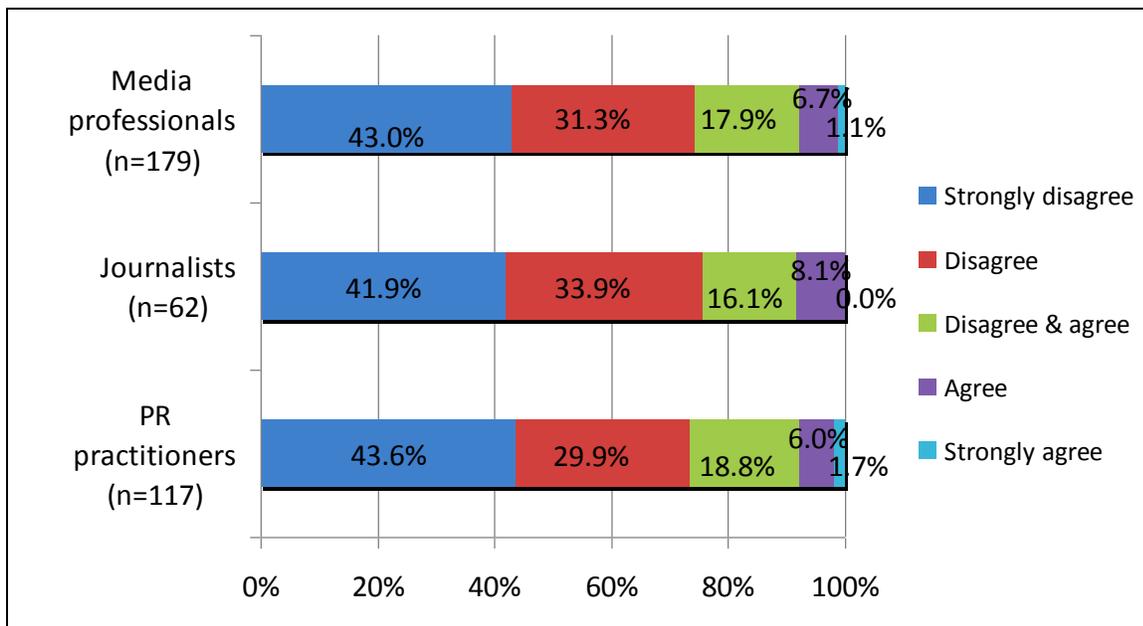


Table 11. *I personally agree that this practice is acceptable (N=179)*



## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The first exploratory study of media practices in Romania demonstrated that non-transparent media practices are present in Romania, similar to other countries around the world (Tsetsura, 2008). The results also showed that, similar to previous findings in Poland and Ukraine, the vast majority of Romanian media professionals, both journalists and public relations practitioners, condemned non-transparent media practices and found them non-acceptable.

The study revealed that both Romanian journalists and public relations professionals who participated in this study believed that corporate owners and publishers have the largest influence on the media in Romania, closely followed by political affiliations of the Romanian media. The government has the lowest influence on the media, according to the respondents. At the same time, in the eyes of Romanian media professionals, municipal government has influence on the media content.

As to other types of influences on the media in Romania, no agreement was reached in regard to whether advertisers and news sources influence the content of the Romanian media. The reason for that is a complex, multi-layered intertwined connection between advertisers and news sources and owners/publishers of the Romanian media outlets (Coman, 2004; Rogojinaru, 2009; Zarojanu, 2001).

The results showed that the Romanian national newspapers, TV, and radio identified paid materials more often than regional and local media in Romania. However, the difference was not as vivid in Romania as it was in Poland (Tsetsura, 2005b). The reason for that, perhaps, is the fact that the two studies were conducted five years apart. It is possible that in the rapidly changing media environment, the difference between national and local media in terms of direct and indirect payments and influences can fluctuate or level out as all media struggle to survive. At the same time, Romanian news websites were named as media outlets that rarely clearly identify the paid content.

When respondents were asked to describe the indirect influences, about half of all respondents reported that journalists rarely stated in the articles that they have received any benefits or products and services from a company featured in the article. Although insignificant, this problem was more apparent among journalists and editors of regional and local media in Romania. Respondents were ambivalent in identifying pressure from advertising sales departments on editors in terms of which news to cover. This type of influence was most widely reported among local and regional magazines and radio programming. However, all respondents reported that these practices periodically happen in all media. Respondents reported that financial pressures on the media rarely happened in Romania. However, journalists reported that these pressures happened more often (in contrast with report from public relations practitioners) as journalists most likely personally face these pressures in their everyday activities (Zarojanu, 2001).

Finally, physical pressures on the Romanian media to influence coverage were almost never present, according to these respondents.

Only a very small fraction of respondents (5 journalists and 9 practitioners) personally agreed that the non-transparent media practices were acceptable. Both journalists and PR practitioners were generally in agreement that the practice of accepting payments for news coverage is unethical. The result is consistent with results of previous studies in Eastern Europe (Tsetsura, 2005b; Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009) and around the world (Tsetsura, 2008). This finding once again confirmed that payments for news coverage are not a cultural particularity of doing media relations in Romania or in other countries in Europe but rather an outlier and a deviation from the norm (Kruckeberg, Tsetsura, & Ovaitt, 2005). This finding also suggests that professional organizations and associations in Romania need to continue discussions about ethical standards and practices of news coverage. Romanian public relations professionals and journalists need to be more critical of their professional everyday practices; need to be accountable for their professional actions; and in general need to engage in conversations with Romanian journalists about the nature of ethical, professional public relations to continue establishing public relations as a legit and responsible profession in Romania.

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