

The Freedom of the Press, a National Fraud (II)

Are you aware of who's financing your favourite television channel or your favourite internet site? Who pays for you to receive this information and opinions that you agree with, considering that otherwise you'd prefer different channels and sites? Search the site: try an additional Google search. With very few exceptions, you will most likely not find out who the actual shareholders are. The ads paying for the content should also be visible. But they're not. They are often replaced with unmarked pseudo-journalistic text giving the impression that it's really an interview with a person of value that returned home, or that's running a successful company. Gabriel Resources was only visible in TV commercials, but the Internet was saturated with cyanide lovers who posed as journalists. But maybe it doesn't really matter who funds a publication? Why bother, since their views are strikingly similar to yours? I would advise you to think twice: if a buyer shares the same viewpoint with the seller that a child must buy ham full of Es (preservatives) because it tastes good (and does not know what is in it), but the seller is privy to the information, unlike the buyer, that the substance that was injected into the ham to make it so pink leads to cancer over time, this is *not* a good consensus. **A consensus based on asymmetric information is the equivalent of fraud: relying on this information for voting purposes is like investing in Caritas.** As such, when you are a Sandra Stoicescu fan and believe that she thinks the same as you because she knows just as much as you, or you laugh at jokes made by right-wing commentators about hipster from last fall, using humour to win over your confidence while devoting endless time for mocking people that are demonstrating, henceforth using their civic rights, I challenge you to think twice. Browse for the symmetry of the presented information, as well as your/your celebrity's disinterest in the discussed material. Don't swallow the bacon like an unfed stray dog that does not benefit from any critical thinking abilities, because there is much poison out there, not only delicacies.

The media situation in Romania is not regulated well or fairly for that matter. Broadcasting via radio/TV requires licensing, so all relevant information should be found at the CNA office. Every company is required to submit proof of their shareholder status to the Commerce Register. When it comes to the Internet, especially if the publication is not commercial, there are few if any rules. Even pre-existing rules don't help much. The Voiculescu family and Dan Diaconescu were the only political figures that everyone knew owned media outlets. Where the money invested in the press and/or the buildings was coming from was unclear until recently, as it seems that much of Voiculescu's investments in his press trust were borrowed by leveraging state properties that he had no rights over. Otherwise, political influence is indirect because it is practiced in the following manners:

- **Exchange of favours** (why should the businessman you gave a DG Regio project to donate to the campaign and declare the amount to the Account Court, when he can just buy ads directly from the newspaper that you support)
- **Entrustment of a middleman** (does anyone know Tronaru Dan Mihai, the one Sebastian Ghiță left Romania TV to? You'd think they learned something from Vântu, whose intermediary stole both his money and his wife, but old habits are hard to change)
- **Media ownership acquisition** (not ads) **by PR companies or their main shareholders** (like *Evenimentul Zilei*, previously discussed)

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- **Repeated bankruptcy** (operations normally move toward new companies with obscure shareholders, the debt remains with the insolvent firms, proceeds from PR favours and services rendered through the media do not show up in either company's cash influx, but are instead used on exporting licenses, building permits, tax return, public contracts, advertising for the state and other services that the real owner of the newspaper needs for other businesses of theirs)
- **Registration abroad, most companies that own TV stations and popular websites, even those that seem less politically-oriented, are registered in Curacao, Bermuda, Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Lichtenstein.** As such, if you know that such and such companies, say Coliba Haiducilor holds the TVCH license, you cannot know who the shareholders are. Additionally, they only hold the license, the production and operation belongs to other companies.

You can read the list of funding sources for the central media on "Clean Romania" [here](#), and the list containing the most notorious bankruptcies from the mainstream media [here](#). The lists are open to later editing if you send us verifiable information. We decided to not include the financial situation, it's enough to say that Antena 3 and B1 do not lose money, Antena 1 was making profit before the trial, and remaining TV stations that also have news are losing money. News sites are not doing well either, many newspapers are in insolvency, financial vulnerability is the rule and health is the exception.

Recall that we asked everyone to publish their shareholder information, major advertisers, approximate financial situation, and state debts, as all these can be used to facilitate undue influence affecting the objectivity of the information. I sent the request to publish this information on their website to 246 publications in May (list can be found on romaniacurata.ro). I received 45 responses of all kinds through email or phone, with only 17 publishing on their site, 8 from the central press, 9 from local media, but even from these 17 the information was not always complete ([list here](#)). In the **mainstream press**, as a response to our call the following list made their information public: Europa FM, Radio France International, Radio 21, Gazeta Sporturilor (Cătălin Tolontan, Manager – Financier, Voiculescu family) Biziday, Capital, Ringier Romania (Libertatea). **These news sources benefit from entirely transparent sources of funding.** They are, however, together with the brave newspapers from the province, less than 5% of the total. We would like to thank those that have partially published funding information; it's at least a start. We consider all the above supporters of this campaign for a clean press. And we encourage everyone else to follow suit, start with what you can and add on with time. **It's never late to be transparent for the sake of your readers.**

We did not set out to uncover the undercover press agents - I do not even know what such an agent is, or does. At a press conference Mircea Marian protested that word travels about him being an undercover agent. Not by us. When Mr. Marian told me, not someone else, that Andrei Alexandru, Văcăroiu's former chief of staff (proven former communist double agent by CNSAS) used to give him information when he was in PSD (Mr. Alexandru being quite a publishable character), what kind of undercover agent could someone be who propagated through a *proven former communist collaborator*? In the same manner, who would hire someone like Negrea who attacks Tolontan the very day Copos gets sentenced, when celebrating the success of Tolo and his colleagues' famous journalistic inquiry that kick-started the entire investigation, or when he takes swings at the Coalition for a Clean Press, besides presenting nonsense about Soros he also cries about us evaluating Elena Udrea's performance from her time at the ministry. I cannot get myself to believe that our Secret Services agencies would hire such clumsy people, I mean, I know George Maior, he is a man of quality and principles. Oh, maybe since certain entities from the system still forward Negrea some documents, it's quite visible again, you can choose to call them agents, but not undercover. They say if you

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recruit an undercover agent, start with one who knows Romanian and can bind three sentences together aside from the compromising documents you give them, such so they do not draw attention to their inferior grammar from the three lines added to the original source (I will spare you more detail, as examples are easy to find). As a survivor of multiple attacks from *Azi*, *Adevărul* from 1990, *România Mare* and *Antena 1* before Antena 3 even existed, I have seen many agents of influence, with technical names of "axe handles", and counting them is useless, as there are too many. Let's not complicate things more with these "undercover agents".

There were objections to this methodology I chose to use, which I am reusing now, and it merits discussion. Provincial newspapers mainly objected that they risk losing their ad purchasers if their real financial situation is published. *Accepted*. Given that ad agencies are direct contributors to this vicious system and small paper can go bankrupt with one phone call, I did not insist in this direction. But the big news agencies cannot receive the same leniency.

Alexandru Lăzescu's argument was that small compromises must be made when "good" press is unviable as a business plan, unable to survive and offer real opposition to the "bad press". *As the saying goes, how else can we know what is good and what is bad except through the methods we use?* How to distinguish a small compromise from a larger one, especially if these compromises are not transparent? Why would the bad press have readers when the good press would not, if it's good after all, why could it not be supported by its audience in such a way so that more than just the compromise remains? If Revista 22 has every reason to hide their funding, as suggested by Andi (or people of hers, I doubt that you will find gifts in the GDS account) any claim of hers to moral superiority dissipates. When asking people to financially back you, do them the courtesy of showing *who* currently supports you. Being amongst those who helped build up the reputation and audience of this magazine at the time when it had a hundred thousand readers I would have wanted more transparency with its finances in recent years, as I will surely not find anyone to swear that there is no connection between funding and the content that does not contain advertising (interviews, for example).

Costi Rogozanu and Patrick Hillerin's argument that the civil society would do well by handle itself instead of the press, that it is not at all transparent – is the lowest level of argumentation that that one could sink to. I will answer this with more courtesy than they offer. Civil society is diverse by its very definition; we have Blandiana one side and Colonel Dogaru on the other, cyclists, climbers, chess players and tango clubs. Civil society operates mainly in the private sphere, has no power and does not produce public good, objective information - these are tasks belonging to the press and as such the press is the only part of civil society that must be held accountable – by its readers. Moreover, stop picking on the civil society as a whole, not all of it handles your transparency (or lack thereof), just me, and I do not need to know who is funding you, my request is to inform your readers, not me. Patrick did not find financing information on the Clean Romania website, but it was there, in the "[About Us](#)" section. But I and I alone generated the idea, others joined, no one is paid in the Coalition for a Clean Press, so here you have my conflict of interest statement. I am funded by the German university I teach at (as a professor), and by the European Commission, as an anticorruption expert, equally (ie, I use the money from the Commission to pay the university to occasionally give me free time to not teach). I do not take fees from any Romanian press, my articles from *A Clean Romania* are taken up by many newspapers at no cost and with my permission, and my privileged relationship *România Liberă* (my tenth year of Thursday editorials) started in July 1990, when miners closed the paper, and I started with others to seek Westward for someone to help us establish a printing company for the free press, *România Liberă* being the flagship of this concept. I support România

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Liberă because of what it meant for Romanian democracy, I collaborated with this published before the recent ownership took over, and hope that Romania will find the necessary resources to save this symbol of anticommunism. But this is not a conflict of interest declaration, but a rather sentimental one, right? *Maybe because I have no interests?* And this campaign is not against journalists, conversely, as the public is tricked into actually swallowing various advertising, not information, individual journalist freedom reached zero in this climate, and I am merely responding to the call of many honest journalists that I've dealt with, and for whom every day is a battle with the employers. Many contemplate leaving the press as the only solution.

Finally, to the objection from the press conference that the world will give us false information and we will gladly swallow them, I respond with the following three documentaries: [media bankruptcy](#), [sources of funding](#) and [press related criminal investigations](#), based entirely on public data published on [romaniacurata.ro](#). Let the RISE Project deal with the offshore issues. And we'll deliberately leave out the provincial press, which can be cleaned up with the help of **A Clean Romania's** monitors and volunteers, but in a careful manner, as we do not want to break down the little remaining freedom of the press, but to help it grow.

At this point the most important questions are the following: who can do something to remove the gray or black area that covers over ninety percent of the Romanian media, and what could be done? We must begin with the first, since the second cannot work independently.

Regulatory bodies either do not exist or are rotten. The history of Pinalti and CNA is quite typical. CNA cannot help save anything; it is by definition too politicized and corrupt. It's hilarious that Narcisa Iorga, who used records (illegal) against Laura Georgescu was put on trial at the same time. The opposition's idea that political parties can fire during the term CNA members is an extreme aberration, and would further increase politicization. CNA must be reorganized without direct political appointments, but given that Parliament appoints CNA members causes me to be quite sceptical.

The second regulatory body that could do something is the IRS. Many of the news conglomerates practice tax evasion. And we know who's really in with the current power is forgiven. But we can really trust the IRS to act impartially? Otherwise its involvement will do more harm than good. The answer is clear: no. Only if it passes under simultaneous "cleansing" under public control, but this is rather a utopic vision. Otherwise, it is clear that ANAF should at least take action on final judicial decisions, and the idea that the Antennas could continue once they returned the 60 million is senseless. It depends what Voiculescu's family values more, but the West has cleaned its dirty press through the judicial system (civil), and we should probably do the same. Yes, it is totally acceptable for the justice system to close publications that stole, slandered or harmed the state. Those with talent from such publications will be recovered through the rest of the press.

The third institution that could take action is Parliament. Parliament could pass a law that prohibits politicians from owning stock in the press, directly or through intermediaries, to strengthen antitrust laws so that shareholding can only be fragmented, and one can no longer be in control, giving power to journalists and not owners. But this path is full of risks, as journalists are also individual entrepreneurs, not just owners. The Competition and Consumer Protection Association could handle the cleaning of the advertising medium, which contributes greatly to corruption. I will take this opportunity to ask advertisement agencies



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when ideas do work

to transparently publish their media investments. The way in which they can help was best explained by Moise Guran [here](#).

Government could in turn decide to finance the media that presents pure information. I would be fully on board with this idea, as long as funding is universal, transparent and follows clear rules, not shady ones like we have in place today. This is the Scandinavian model; the media is financed by subscriptions (everybody is subscribed to a newspaper), commercials and state subsidies. **Funding would not distinguish between public and private media as long as the objectives and performance specifications would be met.** Civil society could also contribute. For example, you could contribute towards an online publication with original content, copyrighted, that would be maintained only through your subscription. Or a news station that you pay separately, like you pay for HBO. If the answer is no, now you finally realize why we have the current press, and why you will come to find objective information only on niche websites, IF you could still find it there.

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