

# The Influence of Business and Government Structures on the Autonomy of Lithuanian Online Media

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**Abstract.** *This article is aimed at presenting a complex approach to the media autonomy concept, with particular focus on the most real aspects of journalistic activity and the factors affecting them. The paper actualizes the notion of media and professional autonomy, introduces the Western tradition of journalistic culture and considers the decisions being made and how they affect professional independence in Lithuanian newsrooms. The practical research part of this piece mostly focuses on newsrooms operating online.*

*Based on the findings of the research conducted on the relationships of business and government structures with the media, and the data of the survey of editors and journalists, it can be stated that several factors affect the autonomy of newsrooms and journalists of Lithuanian internet portals: 1) the owners of a media outlet; 2) the political and business interests of the owners; 3) an absence of ethical norms, such as documents regulating professional activities; 4) an absence of mechanisms for feedback and resolution of conflicts of interests; 5) a lack of transparency and impartiality in internet portals; 6) political and business interests; 7) the hierarchical structure of an editorial office.*

*An analysis of the information about owners and documents published in internet portals revealed that the editorial offices either do not provide any information about the shareholders (owners) altogether or this information is provided to the general public in a laconic and sleek manner. Regardless*

*of the fact that some of the portals provide information that shareholders do not interfere with the work of the editorial office, none of them referred to a mechanism for dissociating the editorial office from the interests of the owners (shareholders). The portals do not provide information about the mechanisms for resolving conflicts (between the readers and the newsroom) operated in the newsrooms. Moreover, there is no information on how the conflicts of editors and journalists pertaining to professional ethics are resolved.*

*The majority of newsrooms (except for Delfi.lt) do not familiarize readers with their work culture. The survey of the journalists and editors of internet media outlets revealed that the newsrooms are not sufficiently autonomous – the majority of those surveyed do not think they work in autonomous newsrooms. The lack of autonomy of newsrooms of the internet portals was also corroborated by the fact that there are topics avoided by journalists and editors alike. Generally, they are associated with competitors, politicians or business structures, advertising customers and the interests of owners. It can be assumed, based on the corpus of the replies given by editors and journalists, that a strong hierarchical structure prevails in editorial offices influencing the individual autonomy of journalists. The overall analysis of the journalist replies shows that the journalists do not complete the texts themselves (texts are corrected; titles are changed). Although the corrections are coordinated with the journalists, the editors make the final decision concerning them. Moreover, the lack of professional autonomy of the journalists is also shown by the fact that journalists are commissioned to write articles, whereas certain articles are removed from the internet space.*

**Keywords:** *media autonomy, media, media organisations, professional autonomy of journalists, media newsrooms, newsrooms autonomy, internet media outlets.*

## **Introduction**

Autonomy in media is directly related to independence. Journalists must be independent while collecting information and preparing news,

and newsrooms must be independent from external forces, such as political or economic constraints.<sup>1</sup> D. M. Ryfe<sup>2</sup> defines autonomy in the daily work of a journalist as an opportunity to freely select aspects, sources of analyzing a story and manners of reporting facts without any control of internal and external forces. This means a right of journalists to perform their duties independently, without any control of an internal and external force (after a survey had been implemented, the term *autonomy* shall be used in the article with this particular meaning). The term *autonomy* is also related to accountability: being accountable is a component of a professional duty.<sup>3,4</sup>

Independence of media is caused by external and internal factors. While preparing everyday tasks (e.g., preparing news), journalists are part of a hierarchical structure and conform to the general decisions of the newsrooms.<sup>5</sup> Editors, who also belong to such a hierarchy, ensure that information reaching society is ethical.<sup>6</sup> The function of autonomy of journalists is to guarantee that the information provided is reliable and unbiased, also the variety of opinions is maintained. Professional values should ensure high professional standards and quality.<sup>7</sup> Autonomy is a criterion of professionalism, meaning that journalists have a right to control their work and be independent in their daily performance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WEAVER, D. H., ed. *The Global Journalist: News People Around the World*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> RYFE, D.M. "Broader and Deeper: Study of Newsroom Culture in a Time of Change." *Journalism*, 2009, 10 (2): 197–216.

<sup>3</sup> NEWTON, L. H.; HODGES, L.; KEITH, S. "Accountability in the Professions: Accountability in Journals." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. 2004, 19 (3/4): 166–90.

<sup>4</sup> SINGER, J. B. "Contested Autonomy: Professional and Popular Claims on Journalistic Norms." *Journalism Studies*. 2007, 8 (1): 79–95.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> KEITH, S. "Newspaper Copy Editors: Perceptions of Their Ideal and Real Ethics Roles." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 2005, 82 (4): 30–51.

<sup>7</sup> FREIDSON, E. *Professionalism: The Third Logic*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

However, many different factors may affect decision making and seeking autonomy. Stephan D. Reese<sup>9</sup> states that a hierarchical managing structure forms an ideology for journalists, for an organization, and the contents of news. The author marks the individual level that includes daily media work, organizational factors and media surrounding, as well as ideologies affecting it. The individual level contains journalistic values, preparation and education, everyday performance (which includes regulations, norms, procedures and technologies, time and space), while the organizational level includes the newsroom policy, economy and management relations, as well as the media environment (the social and cultural medium in which medias operate). Constraints to autonomy are always represented as a combination of organizational and structural constraints. Usually the higher the rank of a media worker, the less dependent he/she is allowed to be.<sup>10</sup>

It is agreed that the autonomy of journalists is restrained by commercialization and corporative control. It was noted that by seeking to save on spending, media uses secondary sources and thus undermines the quality of news. R. McChesney notes that the requirement to not harm the interests of media owners causes a media crisis, as the constantly reducing autonomy of journalists evidently undermines democracy.<sup>11</sup>

This article analyzes the factors that influence media autonomy. Special attention is paid to the topical aspects of journalistic performance, such as professional autonomy and the inner culture of media work. Our study purpose is achieved by analyzing the notion of me-

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<sup>9</sup> HARRO-LOIT, H., LAUK, E., KUUTTI, H., LOIT, U. *Professional autonomy in journalism as a factor for safeguarding freedom of expression: A comparative perspective. Media freedom and independence in 14 European countries: A comparative perspective* [interactive]. 2012 [visited on 2014-03-29] <<http://www.mediadem.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/D3.1.pdf>>

<sup>10</sup> REESE, S. D. "Understanding the Global Journalist: A Hierarchy of Influences Approach." *Journalism studies*. 2001, 2 (2): 173–187.

<sup>11</sup> MCCHESENEY, R. W. "The Problem of Journalism: A Political Economical contribution to an Explanation of the Crisis in Contemporary US Journalism." *Journalism Studies*. 2003, 4 (3): 299–329.

dia and professional autonomy by defining the factors that influence professional autonomy in Lithuanian newsrooms. This is achieved in two phases of the study: first, an analysis of influence that business and government structures have on media (subchapter no. 2.1) presents information on the owners disclosed in internet media and their relations with the newsroom; second, an analysis of a survey of journalists and editors (subchapter no. 2.2).

## 1. Methodology of the Survey

The article concentrates on major online newsrooms, such as: *delfi.lt*, *15min.lt*, *lrytas.lt*, *alfa.lt*, *vz.lt*. The survey was implemented based on quality survey methodology according to the principle of grounded theory. The key idea of such a survey strategy is not to create a theory that would be based on other scientific sources or theoretical reflections, but a theory grounded on empirically selected data, on the experience and outlook of the survey objects.<sup>12</sup> In order to assess the link between business structures and media, publicly available information on newsrooms and the owners of online news agencies *delfi.lt*, *15min.lt*, *lrytas.lt*, *alfa.lt* and *vz.lt* was analyzed, as well as the legal acts regulating the internal activity of the newsrooms.

Internal performance culture and principles of labour ethics of media were analyzed based on data selected during an online poll. Persons working in online media that were selected by non-probability sampling were interviewed for quality data. Respondents were selected based on the “snowball principle.” 18 editors and reporters from the abovementioned media newsrooms were interviewed in a quality survey (11 reporters and 7 editors). 7 interviewed respondents have five years of work experience, 7 have an experience of over five years, yet not exceeding ten years, and 4 respondents had an experience of

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<sup>12</sup> TELEŠIENĖ, A. Įvadinis kursas į kompiuterizuotą kokybinių duomenų analizę [interactive]. Vilnius. Kauno technologijos universitetas, 2008 [visited on 2014-03-29] <[http://www.lidata.eu/index.php?file=files/mokymai/NVivo/nvivo.html&course\\_file=nvivo\\_II\\_2\\_6.html](http://www.lidata.eu/index.php?file=files/mokymai/NVivo/nvivo.html&course_file=nvivo_II_2_6.html)>

ten years and over of working in a newsroom. Reporters and editors of online media were given a questionnaire that dealt with such topics as the work culture in media, opportunities to select analyzed subjects, sponsored articles, editing of articles without informing the author, marking of sponsored articles etc. The questionnaire prepared was posted online, and a particular link thereof was sent to the target audience group – internet media editors and reporters. In order to ensure the complete anonymity of survey participants, respondents were asked to only indicate demographical data – age, gender, work experience in media, position. The representatives of newsrooms did not have to indicate a workplace. The formulation of the questionnaire was based on several principles: specific, precise and particular questions, to which respondents would be able to give answers (based on their qualification and work experience); while making the questionnaire, it was also thought of the fact that it would be beneficial for research if the answers of different respondents would be analyzed and compared, and that the questions presented within the questionnaire should not raise any doubts concerning the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents.

Questions provided in the questionnaire sought to find out the opinion of editors and reporters on media in general, reveal the situation in the newsrooms, the notion of media autonomy and the opportunities of a reporter or editor. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions, which required answers only as *yes* or *no*. On the other hand, reporters and editors were given a possibility to express their personal opinions and insert comments. Thus, media representatives had an opportunity to give detailed answers and to argue their opinions or to provide particular answers to questions on work culture, ethical principles and professional autonomy in their workplaces.

## 2. Empirical survey

### 2.1. Analysis of the Influence of Business and Government Structures on Media Autonomy

Economic dependency on a media owner is one of the factors that allow us to determine the autonomy of media. When speaking of media autonomy from the perspective of the form of management, researchers claim that media might be controlled either by the state, by private capital or by derivatives of the state and private capital.<sup>13,14</sup>

We saw an example of an allowable amount of state structure impact on Lithuanian internet media when EU funds were used in the following cases: for several recent years, the online news agency *15min.lt* was subsidized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania (URM) for preparing and maintaining the English and Russian versions of their website. *Delfi.lt* also prepares and maintains the Russian, Polish and English versions of the website with monetary funds received from the URM. It should be noted that *delfi.lt* implemented and is still engaged in other projects related to government institutions. An example is the project *MyEp*, which was also financed from the funds of the European Parliament (EP). Another example – the project *Grynas*, which was prepared by *delfi.lt* using the funds of the EU and the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lithuania. Having analyzed the information on public procurement it may be asserted that the “purchase of information and publicity services” seems to be still popular among different ministries and state bodies today.

To evaluate exactly how much is media dependent on business and state structures, the link between owners and newsrooms must be taken into account. According to data from 2012, provided by the Lithuanian unit of *Transparency International*, the owner of UAB *Delfi* is a Latvian

<sup>13</sup> MCCULLAGH, C. *Media Power: a Sociological Introduction*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> JUODYTĖ, A. “Žurnalistų darbo apmokėjimo schemos: nuo atlyginimo iki ekonominio spaudimo.” *Tiltai*, 2007, 39: 127–145.

company *Delfi Holding Sia*, which is part of the *Express Grupp AS*, and that one belongs to another four shareholders.<sup>15</sup> The website *delfi.lt* states this information to its readers in a short message, although data regarding shareholders and work culture in the newsroom is lacking. It is not clear how the autonomy of the newsroom would be ensured in the case of a dispute between the newsroom and the CEO of the company, who represents the interests of shareholders. Dependency is also discussed in the exploratory research report on media accountability issued by Transparency International, which highlights the importance of access to information on media owners on the website.<sup>16</sup> The second largest Lithuanian media company, UAB Lietuvos Rytas, controls the online media website *lyrtas.lt*. UAB Lietuvos Rytas is owned by a few shareholders, in particular by the chief editor of the newspaper *Gedvydas Vainauskas*, the deputy chief editor *Vidmantas Strimaitis* and businessman *Benas Gudelis*, who bought shares of UAB Snoras Media of the bankrupt AB Bank Snoras from the state in 2013. The portal provides no information on its shareholders on the website *lyrtas.lt*, which is controlled by the Lietuvos Rytas Group; likewise, no code of ethics or other means are posted therein, which would ensure the independency of newsrooms and reporters from the owners of the company.

The third largest media site in Lithuania (and second largest online portal) *15min.lt* was controlled by a Norwegian company Schibsted Media Group until 2013, which sold its group Eesti Meedia to a group of its executives and to an Estonian investor Margus Linnamäe. The online website *15min.lt* includes a short message on its shareholders. General information on the shareholders *15min.lt*, Eesti Meedia, is provided in English. It should be noted that the website, as well as others, does not

<sup>15</sup> Transparency International. Žiniasklaidos priemonių savininkai [interactive]. Vilnius. 2012 [visited on 2014-01-01] <<http://stirna.info>>

<sup>16</sup> Transparency International. Žiniasklaidos atskaitingumas Latvijoje, Lietuvoje ir Švedijoje [interactive]. Vilnius. 2009 [visited on 2014-03-29] <[http://transparency.lt/media/filer\\_public/2013/01/22/ziniasklaidos\\_atskaitingumas\\_latvijoje\\_lietuvoje\\_ir\\_svedijoje\\_zvalgomasis\\_tyrimas.pdf](http://transparency.lt/media/filer_public/2013/01/22/ziniasklaidos_atskaitingumas_latvijoje_lietuvoje_ir_svedijoje_zvalgomasis_tyrimas.pdf)>



provide any detailed information on the owners or executives of the website *15min.lt*; also, no information on the company management structure is provided. Data provided by newsrooms of local, regional and national newspapers, magazines and media of information society, which are published by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, only include the shareholders of companies and managing bodies; however, the Ministry of Culture is not obligated to collect information on the manner of ensuring independency and autonomy of newsrooms, and media owners are not obligated to provide such information to the Ministry.

These aspects regarding the online websites *alf.lt* and *vz.lt* were also analyzed. Both news websites are parts of larger business structures. *Alfa.lt* belongs to UAB MG Baltic Media trust. The holding includes companies Apranga and Mineraliniai Vandenys, both operating in Lithuania. The online site *vz.lt* is managed by an international company, Bonnier Business Press, which issues newspapers, magazines and is engaged in organizing conferences. Unlike the internet news website *alfa.lt*, which does not disclose any information on its links to business or the influence on the activities of their newsroom, *vz.lt* declares such information and highlights the impartiality of members of the board, as well as non-intervention with the daily work of the newsroom. At this point, the internet newspaper *vz.lt* is exceptional in the context of all the websites observed, as it publicly declares an obligation of reporters of the news website to stick to the Code of Ethics of Lithuanian Reporters and Publishers.

Based on the information collected and provided by experts at the Lithuanian unit of Transparency International on major internet media, it may be assumed that a major part of mass media is a component of larger businesses. In other words, Lithuanian media is closely related to businesses operating in Lithuania.<sup>17</sup> For instance, businessman B. Gudelis, who owns KristiAna, a company controlling a network of

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<sup>17</sup> Transparency International. Žiniasklaidos priemonių savininkai [interactive]. Vilnius, 2012 [visited on 2014-01-01] <<http://stirna.info>>

perfumery stores in our country and in Latvia, has acquired a portion of the shares of UAB Lietuvos Rytas. The owner of the internet news website *alfa.lt* and television channel Laisvas Nepriklausomas Kanalas is the oldest trust of Lithuania – AB MG Baltic. In 2010, MG Baltic owned 63 companies. However, key and major internet medias have no direct links to business structures in Lithuania. Internet newspapers *delfi.lt*, *15min.lt* and *vz.lt* are owned by foreign companies, which, apart from media business, have no other interests in our country.

It should be added that in analyzing publicly available information, online portals *delfi.lt* and *vz.lt* have internal rules of procedure – codes of ethics, which are followed by newsrooms (reporters) in their professional activity. However, only the newsroom of *vz.lt* in their online site clearly indicates its shareholders and gives a concise explanation on segregation between the interests of the newsroom and the shareholders. The abovementioned internet medias post no declaration on public and private interests, as well as the means of solving conflicts of interests and provide no policy on the reconciliation of public and private interests. Article 23 of the Law on Public Information states that “the provider of public information shall adopt internal rules of procedure and/or an internal code of ethics.<sup>18</sup> At least one of these documents approved by the provider of the public information shall include rights, liabilities, responsibility, labor relations of reporters and means of protecting a reporter from the possible restriction of his/her rights.” Only *delfi.lt* has posted such a document in the end of 2013.<sup>19</sup> However, the document does not include all rights and liabilities of employees of the newsroom. First off, the Code of Ethics of Delfi often mentions two concepts – of the reporter and of Delfi itself; however, the rights and liabilities of editors (editor in chief, daily editor, editors

<sup>18</sup> Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. Law on Public Information [interactive]. 2006, [visited on 2014-03-29] <[http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc\\_l?p\\_id=459047](http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=459047)>.

<sup>19</sup> Delfi. Code of Ethics of Delfi [interactive]. Vilnius. Delfi, 2013 [visited on 2014-03-07]. <<http://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/delfi-pristato-savo-etikos-kodeksa.d?id=62344011>>.

of units) is completely absent. By having analyzed such data, we may conclude that it may not be clearly claimed that business affects media autonomy. Nevertheless, the medias being part of business structures, a lack of information on interests of owners or possible conflict of interests, an absence of the code of ethics of journalists (except for one case) all create conditions to violate autonomy or to restrict it. As it will be revealed in the analysis of the survey of journalists and editors, the formation of these conditions will actually reduce autonomy.

## **2.2. Journalist and Editor Survey Analysis**

After reviewing answers of reporters and editors who took part in the survey, a general trend became evident that editors and journalists think that they are employed at publications that are dependent from business or political structures. Although reporters claimed that even though they “are employed at a technically-independent newsroom” or that “personally have not been asked to write a commissioned article,” answers have revealed that the media is based on an “orders” policy, which is most probably caused by business structures (i.e., “All newsrooms are affected by money from sponsors”). Such answers of respondents correlate with data gathered from the Eurobarometer, a first-of-its-kind study on corruption, announced in the history of the EU. A part of its respondents claimed to have felt the influence of political and economic factors on the way their newsrooms operate.

The answers of respondents to the question on newsroom autonomy were supplemented by answers that reflected the culture within their newsrooms. The major part of the interviewed answered positively to “Do editors and journalists independently select a subject to analyze,” but some respondents claimed to receive subjects, which are “given from the above.” As noted by editors and reporters, they were given specific subjects that were related to the contractors of advertisements or business interests. It is a common practice of editors offering subjects and discussing the accents thereof during overview meetings; however, there are also such situations when a particularly specific subject is

formulated, which is “not related” to the context of the day or the week, as it is much more related to a particular business or particular political interests than to objective journalism. Answers given by participants of the survey that reflect the selection of the subject (i.e., “I may select a subject but it will not necessarily be published,” or “It depends on the situation”), allows us to think that unwanted subjects were offered and reporters were restricted in selecting them.

Article 46 of the Law on Public Information states an obligation to the Commission of Ethics of Lithuanian Journalists and Publishers to hear mutual disputes between journalists and providers of public information or publishers concerning violations of the Code of Ethics of Lithuanian Journalists and Publishers; however, individual issues related to ethics of work organization of journalists and editors of the newsroom are rarely heard. Respondents answered the question “Is the reporter (editor) allowed to elaborate on the subject by himself, or is he offered some kind of guidelines,” by stating that most often they may analyze the subject by themselves; however, “if the subject is offered from above, the guidelines of analyzing it are provided.”

The complicated situation regarding professional autonomy became even more evident when newsroom employees were given the question “Are there any subjects in the newsroom that would rather be avoided?” Almost half of the respondents claimed that such subjects are present in their newsrooms. Such answers imply that there are certain subjects that would not be welcomed in the media. As newsrooms have no labor regulations (such as guidelines, codes of ethics etc.), which would be published in public, a reader is left wondering why a certain piece of news would be announced by one media outlet and ignored by the other. As newsrooms fail to follow clear and public principles of professional ethics, a reader faces reasonable doubts on the objectivity and autonomy of the body preparing the information. The answers of journalists and editors in part bears to reason a hypothesis that a given newsroom operates under the influence of external and internal powers.

Self-censorship policy is meant to preserve sources and advertising contractors or to protect economic and political interests of a media owner in fear of the possible conflict with the heads of a state, in such a circumstance when a media owner may sooner or later use his/her influence and restrict the possibilities of the media to receive information. The existence of self-censorship policy in newsrooms is in part witnessed by such answers of journalists as the following: “There are subjects which would better not be analyzed, especially those concerning politicians or business structures; unless it’s a competitor-sensitive subject.”

The autonomy of newsrooms – an independence from business and political structures – is traditionally a welcomed condition for free and independent journalism; nevertheless, it is hardly accomplished and most probably a utopian concept in the context of Lithuanian society and politics. In a certain sense, media outlets are at risk of becoming parts of local political and economic networks that their owners already belong to. In such conditions, it is almost impossible for media representatives to work professionally.<sup>20</sup>

Journalists should follow the Code of Ethics of Journalists and Editors; however, it is not an individual normative legal act, which directly regulates the performance of a journalist or an editor in a media institution. Thus, if the newsroom lacks such an individual normative legal act that would regulate performance culture, procedure and principals of ethics in the institution, owners are presented with all the opportunities to use newsrooms for accomplishing business interests, i.e., to meet the requirements of advertisement contractors, politicians and other interested parties. Researchers D. H. Weaver and G. C. Wilhoit note that an increasing hierarchy in newsroom organizations largely affects the autonomy of journalists.<sup>21</sup> S. D. Reese

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<sup>20</sup> ŠTĚTKA, V. *The Rise of the Tycoons: Economic Crisis and Changing Media Ownership in Central Europe* [interactive]. 2013 [visited on 2014-03-29] <http://visegradrevue.eu/?p=1618>.

<sup>21</sup> WEAVER, D. H.; WILHOIT, G. C. *The American journalist in the 1990s: U.S. news people at the end of an era*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996.

concludes that the operation of journalists in newsrooms is more subordinated than in any other institution (medical or legal).<sup>22</sup>

Editors and journalists that took part in the survey claim that articles prepared by them are corrected, and sometimes the opinions of the authors are disregarded: “It is corrected, but my comments are not always taken in regard; It was put on the *right* track for several times; Such cases were possible when I worked for a certain media group.” Some answers of employees of internet portals reveal the labor culture of newsrooms. For instance, in a certain newsroom of internet an internet media website, a principle is applied that if a journalist does not agree with the corrections of the editor, one may not write his/her name under the article. During an overview survey of media accountability, it was noticed that written norms and regulations established in the newsroom provide guidance for employees, and a public declaration of information preparation policy help both employees and readers to understand according with what type of principles the newsroom operates, what kind of values does it rest upon, how does it work and why. Data from the editors’ and journalists’ survey revealed that the newsrooms of internet websites have certain principals of preparation of an informative article. Moreover, discussion is allowed for between an editor and a journalist concerning the context and length of an article. However, newsrooms do not explain what type of principles do they follow in preparing news, maintaining the contents of a website or formatting articles.

Information portals operating in digital space give an opportunity for editors or journalists to edit texts that already have been published, to change their contents without indicating the date of amendment. The lack of clearly defined principles of professional ethics in the newsroom provides favorable conditions to formulate a practice when articles are erased or amended without indicating who did it and when it was done. Erasing a published article from a virtual environment

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<sup>22</sup> RESEE, S. D. “Understanding the Global Journalist: A Hierarchy of Influences Approach.” *Journalism studies*. 2001, 2 (2): 1730187.

is in a way related to censorship conducted within the newsroom or the impact of external forces to the solutions of editors. The fact that articles are published and later on erased provides us with the following observation: the impact of internal powers (a self-censorship mechanism does not work at first and middle decision making levels) or the direct influence of external powers (economic or political structures) may be exerted by either owners of media outlets or their top-level executives (editors-in-chief). Journalists tend to permanently face restrictions concerning the structure of a media organization. Such restriction violates the autonomy of journalists and prohibits them from acting based on their own beliefs; moreover, the structure embedded in media organizations by foreseeing the work results of journalists gives way for their control.<sup>23,24</sup> A. Richter states that in post-Soviet countries, “soft-censorship” can be defined as a practice employed by authorities and officials, who at their disposal have the means to exert direct or indirect pressure on media outlets and journalists in order to restrict the gathering, production and distribution of mass information so as to secure their own political interests and ensure a lack of monitoring of their political activities. The consequence of such a situation is the debasement of democratic principles, which in turn declines public confidence in both the media and the authorities.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The autonomy of newsrooms and journalists of internet media in Lithuania is possibly restricted by several factors: owners of the publication, their political and economic interests, political and business interests, advertising contractors, an absence of norms of

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> SKOVSGAARD, M. “Watchdogs on a Leash? The Impact of Organisational Constraints on Journalists Perceived Professional Autonomy and Their Relationship With Superiors.” *Journalism*. 2014, 15: 344.

<sup>25</sup> RICHTER, A. *Post-soviet Perspective on Censorship and Freedom of the Media*. UNESCO: Moscow, 2007.

ethics as mechanisms regulating professional activity used for solving disputes and a lack of transparency and impartiality of operation in online portals.

The information on shareholders and their activity, provided by all websites, that was analyzed during this survey is meagre and incomplete for the purpose of making an opinion on the autonomy of the media, the independence of a newsroom from the interests of shareholders. However, none of the internet news agencies that were mentioned in this article indicated the manner in which the operations of their newsrooms were separated from the interests of the owners (shareholders). If such issues are not identified, the information on them is not publicized and is unavailable for the reader (user). Internet daily *vz.lt* provides a laconic declaration that its owners (shareholders) keep out of the work of their newsroom; internet daily *delfi.lt* has such a notion embedded in the Delfi Code of Ethics; other mentioned portals do not provide any information.

None of the previously mentioned media portals provided any information on conflict-reducing mechanisms that were effective in the newsrooms, which would contribute to avoiding conflicts between the readers and newsrooms concerning possible subjectivity, actual mistakes or partiality. Newsrooms also fail to explain how are conflicts between editors and journalists concerning professional ethics of journalists solved (if the provisions of professional ethics of a journalist and an editor disagree).

Most newsrooms (not including internet daily *delfi.lt*) fail to present to the readers their work culture, provide no information on the principles of information preparation, checking their sources, manners of seeking to avoid partiality; no facts are given on how respect is shown to a different opinion, what do newsrooms and journalists do if they are offered, for example, to try a product, go on a journey, visit sponsored events or are provided with any other kind of gifts.

The survey revealed that journalists do not feel completely independent (autonomous) in preparing articles. The facts regarding



enforced subjects and, alternatively, the censorship of certain other subjects, the corrections of texts disregarding the opinion of an author – all these are obstacles in the way of seeking an ideally autonomous media policy. Even though it is complicated to establish cause-and-effect relationships, yet correlative aspects may be seen between the autonomous activity of journalists and the media link with business entities.

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