

# **The Business of Ethics, the Ethics of Business**

**Hungary**

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## List of acronyms

APEH	State Tax Authority
Fidesz	Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Association
KSH	Central Statistical Office
MAKUSZ	Hungarian Catholic Journalists Association
MDF	Hungarian Democratic Forum
MSZP	Hungarian Socialist Party
MTV	Hungarian Television
MUK	Hungarian Journalists' Community
MUOSZ	Hungarian Journalists' Association
ORTT	National Radio and Television Board
SZDSZ	Free Democrats Association-Hungarian Liberal Party

## I. Executive summary

After its political transformation, Hungary's print press and broadcasting media developed in fundamentally different ways. The privatisation of the newspaper industry began as early as 1989 when the licensing procedure imposed upon print publications was abolished, and thousands of new titles entered the market in just a few years. The privatisation of the broadcasting industry, however, was delayed by a "frequency moratorium" that maintained the state monopoly in broadcasting until 1996, when the Broadcasting Act was passed. The nationwide commercial television channels went on air in late 1997 and the nationwide commercial radio stations in early 1989.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Hungarian media landscape was subject to a "media war", a conflict over control of the news media that divided both the political elite and the journalistic community. As a result, the NGO Freedom House described the status of the Hungarian media as only "partly free" for some of the 1990s.

Hungary currently has three nationwide terrestrial television channels, including the public service broadcaster *Magyar Televízió* (Hungarian Television, MTV) and the private commercial channels *RTL Klub* and *TV2*. There are two satellite broadcasters, the public channels *m2* and *Duna Televízió* (Danube Television). In the radio market, the public service broadcaster *Magyar Rádió* (Hungarian Radio) has three stations, *Kossuth*, *Petőfi* and *Bartók*, and there are two nationwide commercial stations, *Sláger Rádió* (Hit Radio) and *Danubius Rádió*. The Broadcasting Act obliges broadcasters to provide impartial news programming. However public broadcasters' news coverage has been biased in favour of the ruling party for most of the past 15 years. Private broadcasters are largely objective in their news coverage.

In the newspaper market, there are four nationwide broadsheets, *Magyar Hírlap*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszabadság* and *Népszava*, which tend to be partisan. The newspaper market has undergone a process of "tabloidisation", and currently tabloid newspapers, especially *Metro* and *Blikk*, dominate the market in terms of circulation. At the local level for dailies, a system of "one county, one title" prevails; unlike the nationwide broadsheets, the county papers cannot be associated with any of the political parties. In fact, they have turned increasingly apolitical since their privatisation. The market of political weeklies is dominated by titles launched during or after the political transformation, most of which display clear-cut ideological preferences. The market of online political publications is now dominated by *Index.hu*, a continuously updated political website established in 1999.

Despite legislative efforts to prevent concentration, the media markets are highly concentrated in terms of audience and advertising share. The biggest obstacle to the true plurality of the media is the small size of the Hungarian market: the relatively small population and its limited purchasing power are insufficient to sustain enough television channels, radio stations and newspapers. Hungary has no press subsidies system to support financially unviable newspapers.

To ensure the transparency of ownership, all business entities must register at one of the courts of registers, where ownership data are accessible for the public at no charge. In addition, broadcasters are obliged to notify the National Radio and Television Board (ORTT) of changes in their ownership structure. However, no legal provision stipulates that media outlets display their ownership structure on their pages or websites.

Hungarian journalism is only halfway to true professionalism. "Lazy journalism"

prevails. Reporters tend to rely on official sources, and independent investigative journalism is rare. As a general rule, journalists are overburdened with work. Freelance journalism is widespread; freelancers are paid by the page, which enhances quantity rather than quality. There is a tradition of partisan journalism. Many reporters and editors consider their work a means of political mobilisation rather than public information. Few media outlets have codes of ethics, and even fewer make their codes accessible to the public. Recently, however, journalists' associations have made efforts to improve professional standards and build public trust. Such efforts include the adoption of joint codes of ethics, the establishment of awards for quality journalism and of in-house ethics committees and Ombudsmen. Since the mid-1990s, journalism education has been launched on a massive scale.

All media outlets must submit an annual income report to the State Tax Authority (APEH) on a yearly basis; this data is accessible to the public. However, few media outlets display such data on their websites. The transparency of funding is hindered by the government practice of providing financial support only to loyal news outlets.

The law stipulates that advertisements should be separated from editorial content in newspapers, and clearly indicated as such in broadcast programmes. However, "advertorials" are not unknown in Hungary. The law is enforced by the Consumer Protection Agency, the Economic Competition Agency and the ORTT.

Data on the relationship between media owners and journalists are quite fragmentary. As a general rule, however, big companies owned by multinational enterprises tend to respect their employees' rights, whereas minor ones owned by Hungarian investors more frequently fail to formalise this relationship or meet their payment obligations. Because of the Hungarian tax system, many journalists are freelancers, which means they are not protected by collective contracts.

The interests of journalists are represented by two major organisations, the Hungarian Journalists Association (MUOSZ) and the Press Union (*Sajtószakszervezet*), which, according to their representatives, mediate quite successfully between journalists and their employers. The mediators' jobs are complicated, however, by political divisions among journalists themselves, who are unable to unite in the face of outside pressure.

A relatively recent representative opinion poll indicates that many journalists are unhappy with their working conditions. The same study reveals that journalists occasionally encounter political or business pressure.

The most frequently discussed ethical issues include violations of personal rights, representation of ethnic and national minorities, conflict of interest rules and depictions of violence and pornography. The most salient issue, however, is bias in the news. Existing codes of ethics, as well as the Broadcasting Act, are a reflection of the ideal of neutral, objective journalism. Most Hungarian journalists, however, engage in partisan journalism. Rather than being independent watchdogs of democracy, journalists tend to consider themselves intellectuals entitled to promote a cause or an ideology. They do not mean to inform but to convince and mobilise voters.

Many representatives of media companies were reluctant to answer questions for this research. The reasons, while unexplained, appear to indicate that they do not recognise the importance of transparency in the industry. Even those outlets which agreed to answer questions limited their responses. In most cases, their codes of ethics are inaccessible to the general public. Moreover, even various journalists' organisations fail to ensure the visibility of their activities.

## II. Context

Hungary is a consolidating post-communist democracy that joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1997 and the European Union in 2004. Since the political transformation in 1989–90, the economy has been largely privatised, and foreign, mostly Western European, investors now have interests in Hungary.

According to the latest census conducted by the Central Statistical Office (KSH) in 2001, Hungary has a population of 10.198 million.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, the per capita GDP was HUF 1,833,599,<sup>2</sup> and the average gross income was HUF 1,646,244.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1990, Hungary has had four democratically elected coalition governments, including the right/conservative Antall–Boross government (1990–94), the left/liberal Horn one (1994–98), the right/conservative Orbán regime (1998–2002) and the left/liberal Medgyessy–Gyurcsány government (2002–). Currently, there are four parties in Parliament, including the current coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP, 178 mandates) and Free Democrats Association–Hungarian Liberal Party (SZDSZ, 20 mandates), as well as the opposition parties Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Association (Fidesz, 169 mandates) and Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF, eight mandates); there are 11 independent MPs as well.<sup>4</sup>

After the political transformation in 1989–90, the print press and the broadcast media pursued fundamentally different development paths. The privatisation of the newspaper industry began as early as 1989. On 15 June, 1989, the last communist government issued a decree abolishing the licensing procedure imposed upon print publications.<sup>5</sup> As a result, thousands of new titles entered the market in just a few years. They include political as well as entertainment newspapers. In 1989 alone, 1,118 new publications were registered.<sup>6</sup> For broadcasters, however, the same government issued a “frequency moratorium” on 3 July 1989 that froze the licensing of radio and television frequencies, and maintained the monopoly of state broadcasters.<sup>7</sup> The moratorium was to remain in effect until passage of a broadcasting act. However, no such law came into force until early 1996, and the privatisation of nationwide broadcasters began only in 1997 (by contrast, the first local television channels had been launched as early as 1986, and the first local radio stations were licensed in 1994).

The reason for the late passage of the Broadcasting Act was the so-called ‘media war,’ a conflict dividing both the political elite and the journalistic community along political lines. At stake was control of the media or, more precisely, what societal and political values the media, especially public service broadcasters, should adhere to. Even though the media war did not involve any physical force, political pressure, especially on public service television, was so intense that for some years of the 1990s, the NGO Freedom House described the

<sup>1</sup> Data provided by the Central Statistical Office (KSH), <[http://www.nepszamlalas.hu/hun/kotetek/10/10\\_osszef.pdf](http://www.nepszamlalas.hu/hun/kotetek/10/10_osszef.pdf)> (accessed 2 July 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The exchange rate in 2003 was about EUR 1 = HUF 254, but fluctuating.

<sup>3</sup> *Magyar statisztika zsebkönyv 2003 (A statistical manual of Hungary 2003)*, issued by the Central Statistical Office, Budapest, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> This paper was completed in August 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Government decree 58/1989. (VI. 15.).

<sup>6</sup> Seregélyesi, János, “A nyomtatott sajtó helyzete” (“The status of the print press”), in Gabriella Cseh & Mihály Enyedi Nagy & Tibor Soltészky (eds) *Médiakönyv 1998 (Annual of the Hungarian media 1998)*. Budapest: ENAMIKÉ, 1998, p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> Government decree no. 1008/10/89/VII. 3.

Hungarian media landscape as only “partly free”.<sup>8</sup> By virtue of a 1989 amendment to the Hungarian Constitution, passage of the Broadcasting Act required a two-thirds majority in Parliament,<sup>9</sup> and since the major political forces could not reach compromise over broadcasting regulations, several attempts failed in the heated atmosphere of the media war before the law was finally passed. At the end of long and bitter debates, the Broadcasting Act was passed with a 90 percent majority on 21 December 1996, and came into effect on February 1 1996. The 1996 Broadcasting Act was amended in 2002 to meet European standards, especially the 97/36/EC (Television Without Frontiers) guideline.<sup>10</sup>

Following the launch of nationwide commercial television channels in October 1997, Hungary currently has three nationwide terrestrial television channels, including the public broadcaster *Magyar Televízió* (Hungarian Television, MTV) and the private channels *RTL Klub* and *TV2*, as well as two satellite broadcasters: the public channels *m2* and *Duna Televízió* (Danube Television). *RTL Klub* is run by M-RTL Rt., and owned by Bertelsmann A.G.’s CLT-UFA S.A. (49 percent), the telephone company MATÁV Rt., a part of the Deutsche Telecom group (25 percent), Pearson Netherlands B.V. (20 percent), and IKO Group (6 percent). *TV2* is run by MTM-SBS Rt., and owned by SBS Broadcasting S.A. (81.51 percent), MTM-TV2 Befektetési Kft. (16 percent) and Tele-München Ferns. GmbH (2.49 percent). In addition, there are 38 Hungarian-language cable channels, most of which are run by Hungarian enterprises, as well as several channels in foreign languages. Currently, the overwhelming majority of the population watches the non-satellite nationwide commercial broadcasters (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Audience share of the leading television channels for the 18- to 49-year-old demographic 2003–2004**

	Audience share (percent)			
	Prime time hours		0–24 hours	
	2003	2004	2003	2004
<i>RTL Klub</i>	39.7	37.5	33.1	33.0
<i>TV2</i>	30.5	30.8	31.4	29.4
<i>MTV</i>	11.8	11.8	11.0	10.5
<i>Viasat3</i>	2.5	3.1	2.6	3.5

Source: AGB Hungary, TV2, RTL Klub

In the radio market, there are two nationwide commercial stations: *Sláger Rádió* (Hit Radio) and *Danubius Rádió*, launched in January and February 1998. *Danubius* is owned by Advent International (100 percent), while *Sláger* is owned by Emmis Broadcasting

<sup>8</sup> See <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/pfsratings.xls>> (accessed 22 June 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of 1949 as amended in 1989, art. 61(4).

<sup>10</sup> I. Law of 1996 on Radio and Television; the changes were implemented by Act XX of 2002. The full text of the law can be downloaded in English from the website of the (Hungarian) National Radio and Television Board at <<http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/getdoc.cgi?docid=99600001.tv&dbnum=62>> (accessed 22 June 2005). On the Broadcasting Act, see Sükösd, Miklós and Gabriella Cseh, “A törvény ereje” (“The force of the law”), in *Médiakutató*, spring 2001 (vol. II. no. 1.), pp. 75–94. On the harmonisation of the 1996 Broadcasting Act with European standards, see Kertész, Krisztina, “Jogharmonizáció az audiovizuális szektorban” (“Legal harmonisation in the audiovisual sector”), in *Médiakutató*, winter 2003 (vol. IV. no. 4.), pp. 85–96.

International Corp. (54 percent), Credit Suisse First Boston Radio Operating B.V. (20 percent), Szuper Express Kft. (15 percent), Magyar Kommunikációs Befektetési Kft. (5.5 percent) and CSFB Hungary Befektetési Kft. (5.5 percent). Since their launch, nationwide commercial broadcasters have taken a market-leading position, while the three channels of the public service broadcaster *Magyar Rádió* (Hungarian Radio), namely *Kossuth*, *Petőfi*, and *Bartók*, have been losing listeners (see Table 2). In addition to nationwide radio stations, there are 141 local radio stations, most of which are run on a commercial basis.

**Table 2. Audience share of the leading radio stations in 2003**

	<b>Audience share (percent)</b>
<i>DanubiusRádió</i> (nationwide commercial)	28.1
<i>Sláger Rádió</i> (nationwide commercial)	27.8
<i>Kossuth</i> (nationwide public service)	20.6
<i>Petőfi</i> (nationwide public service)	11.1
<i>Juventus</i> (networked commercial)	7.8
<i>Rádió 1</i> (networked commercial)	2.6
<i>Bartók</i> (nationwide public service)	1.2

**Source:** Szonda Ipsos

The Broadcasting Act obliges broadcasters to provide impartial news programming.<sup>11</sup> However, as previously stated, the public broadcasters' news coverage has been biased in favour of the government of the day for most of the past 15 years.<sup>12</sup> Private broadcasters are largely neutral in their news coverage. They have respected the legal requirement of impartiality by de-politicising their news bulletins.

The Hungarian newspaper market is regulated by the 1986 Press Act, modified in January 1990.<sup>13</sup> In Hungary, the majority of nationwide and county daily newspapers were privatised in the early 1990s, and have changed owners several times since then. There are four nationwide broadsheets, *Magyar Hírlap*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszabadság*, and *Népszava*, all established long before the political transformation. *Magyar Hírlap* is owned by the majority shareholders AdocSemic Kft., Adoc-Interprint Kft., as well as editor-in-chief Szombathy Pál, and a private individual. *Magyar Nemzet* is owned by editor-in-chief Gábor Liskay (80 percent) and Pro-Aurum Rt. (20 percent). *Népszabadság* is owned by B.V. Tabora (60 percent), Szabad Sajtó Alapítvány (26 percent) as well as *Népszabadság Egyesület* and the editorial board. *Népszava*

<sup>11</sup> I. Law of 1996 on Radio and Television, art. 4. (1): "Information on domestic and foreign events of public interest, facts and controversial issues shall be multi-faced, objective, topical and balanced.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Argejő Éva et al, "Jelentések az MR és az MTV hírműsorairól" ("Reports on the news programmes of Hungarian Radio and Hungarian Television"), in Sándor Kurtán, Péter Sándor and László Vass (eds), *Magyarország politikai évkönyve 1994 (Political annual of Hungary 1994)*, Demokrácia Kutatások Magyar Központja Alapítvány, Budapest, 1994, pp. 588–592; Beck László, "Kormánytűlsúly a hírműsorokban" ("Pro-government bias in news programmes"), in Éva Argejő (ed.), *Jelentések könyve (Book of reports)*, Új Mandátum, Budapest, 1998, pp. 24–25; Baranyai Eszter and András Plauschin, "A politikai hírműsorok tájékoztatási gyakorlata 2001-ben" ("Political news programmes in 2001"), in *Jel-Kép*, 1/2002, p. 31; Nyilas György, "Összehasonlító elemzés az MTV1 és a tv2 esti, főműsoridős híradóiról" ("A comparative analysis of the prime-time news programmes of MTV1 and tv2"), in *Jel-Kép*, 4/2000, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> II. Law of 1986 on the Press; the changes were implemented by Act XI of 1990.

is owned by VH Kiadó Kft. (74 percent) and Békés Project Kft (26 percent). The circulation of these titles has declined in recent years, as a result of which they have adopted a trend toward moderate tabloid formats. A single exception is *Magyar Nemzet*.

Nationwide broadsheets tend to engage in partisan journalism. Even though they claim political independence, their sympathies with the various political parties are an open secret. Since the political transformation, several attempts have been made to introduce new broadsheets onto the market. However, these attempts have all failed.<sup>14</sup>

The political transformation in 1989–1990 has also given rise to the tabloid press, with the first such title, *Mai Nap*, emerging as early as February 1989.<sup>15</sup> Today, tabloid titles lead the market of nationwide daily publications. The highest circulation daily newspaper is *Metro*, a tabloid distributed free of charge (see Table 3). *Metro* is owned by Metro International (90 percent) and a private individual (10 percent). It is followed, in terms of circulation figures, by *Blikk*, a part of the Ringier Group.

**Table 3. Average print copies of the major daily newspapers in 2002 and 2003**

Title	Average number of print copies (thousands)	
	2002	2003
<i>Metro</i> (tabloid)	320	317
<i>Blikk</i> (tabloid)	257	290
<i>Népszabadság</i> (broadsheet)	221	207
<i>Nemzeti Sport</i> (sports)	117	116
<i>Magyar Nemzet</i> (broadsheet)	116	102
<i>Mai Nap</i> (tabloid)	–	66
<i>Expressz</i> (classified ads)	58	48
<i>Népszava</i> (broadsheet)	47	37
<i>Világgazdaság</i> (economist)	16	14

Source: Central Statistical Office (KSH)

Among the county daily newspapers, a system of “one county, one title” prevailed before the political transformation. The county dailies, issued by local party bureaus before the changes, were privatised in 1990, yet most of them have preserved a *de facto* monopoly in their respective markets. Of the 24 papers in Hungary’s 19 counties, 22 are now owned by Western European media enterprises (including Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Axel Springer, Funk Verlag und Druckerei and Associated Newspapers), and only two by Hungarian investors.

Unlike the nationwide broadsheets, the county papers cannot be associated with any of the political parties; in fact, they have turned increasingly apolitical since their privatisation. Most of the county papers have preserved their readers, and some of them have even expanded their market share (see Table 4).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Juhász, Gábor, “Az országos minőségi napilapok piaca 1990–2002” (“The market of nationwide broadsheets 1990–2002”), in *Médiakutató*, spring 2003 (vol. IV. no. 1.), pp. 85–102.

<sup>15</sup> Gulyás, Ágnes, “The Development of the Tabloid Press in Hungary”, in Colin Sparks and John Tulloch (eds), *Tabloid Tales. Global debates over Media Standards*, London & Boulder & New York & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Zöldi, László, “A globális sajtó. A külföldi tulajdonban lévő helyi újságok Magyarországon” (“The global



Table 4. Average print copies of the county daily newspapers in 2002 and 2003

Title	Average number of print copies (thousands)	
	2002	2003
<i>Kisalföld</i>	81	82
<i>Zalai Hírlap</i>	61	61
<i>Vas Népe</i>	61	61
<i>Kelet-Magyarország</i>	58	59
<i>Napló</i>	56	56
<i>Fejér Megyei Hírlap</i>	53	53
<i>Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Napló</i>	52	52
<i>Észak-Magyarország</i>	51	55
<i>Új Dunántúli Napló</i>	49	49
<i>Dél-Magyarország</i>	44	36
<i>Petőfi Népe</i>	43	41
<i>Somogyi Hírlap</i>	38	35
<i>Békés Megyei Hírlap</i>	33	36
<i>Új Néplap</i>	32	28
<i>Heves Megyei Hírlap</i>	24	23
<i>24 Óra</i>	23	23
<i>Tolnai Népujság</i>	21	20
<i>Délvilág</i>	16	22
<i>Déli Hírlap</i>	12	10
<i>Nógrád Megyei Hírlap</i>	12	11
<i>Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Hírlap</i>	12	12
<i>Békés Megyei Napló</i>	11	–
<i>Dunaújvárosi Hírlap</i>	10	10

Source: KSH

Political weeklies are dominated by titles launched during or after the political transformation. These newspapers either have clear-cut ideological preferences (such as *Magyar Narancs*, *168 Óra*, *Hetek*, *Nemzetőr*), are more or less openly allied with a political party (*Magyar Demokrata*, *Heti Válasz*, *Kis Újság*, *Magyar Fórum*), or are politically neutral but focus on the economy (*HVG*, *Figyelő*).<sup>17</sup> The circulation of most of the political weeklies has gone down in recent years (see Table 5).

press. Foreign-owned county dailies in Hungary”), in *Médiakutató*, winter 2001 (vol. II. no. 4.), pp. 149–160.

<sup>17</sup> Juhász, Gábor, “A jobboldali hetilapok piaca 1989–2003” (“The market of right-wing weeklies 1989–2003”), in *Médiakutató*, spring 2004 (vol. V. no. 1.), pp. 61–72.

**Table 5. Average print copies of the major political weeklies in 2002 and 2003**

Title	Average number of print copies (thousands)	
	2002	2003
<i>Szabad Föld</i>	184	168
<i>Heti Világazdaság</i>	132	128
<i>168 Óra</i>	58	53
<i>Heti Válasz</i>	39	36
<i>Magyar Narancs</i>	18	18
<i>Új Ember</i>	17	40

Source: Central Statistical Office

The market for online political publications is dominated by *Index.hu* (owned by Sydinvest Rt.), a continuously updated political website established in 1999. Even though many of the print daily and weekly publications have an online version offering news and comment, *Index.hu* is the most frequently accessed website with 174,000 readers a day. Lately, *Index.hu* has pursued the tabloid trend targeting young adult audiences.<sup>18</sup> It is followed, in terms of readership, by [*origo*], run by T-Online Magyarország Rt. Recently established competitors to *Index.hu* and [*origo*] include *hirszerzo.hu*, an online publication run by Hírszerző Kft. and offering, in addition to news, comment and detailed background information, as well as *Stop.hu*, another online news outlet owned by a Swiss company and a Hungarian individual. In recent years, online publications have improved both their market and audience share.

This study aims to reveal the relationship between owners and editors within the major Hungarian media outlets. It is based on a secondary analysis of data available in the literature as well as oral or written interviews with the representatives of selected media companies. The sample of the selected companies is by no means representative. When making a selection, we first contacted the largest media outlets in terms of audience share in their respective fields (i.e. the biggest television channel, the biggest nationwide broadsheet, etc.). However, many spokespeople for these outlets failed to respond to questions. In such cases, attempts were made to contact the second- or the third-biggest company.

Of the media outlets selected in the first and second rounds, the online news outlet *Index.hu*, the online news outlet [*origo*], the publisher of several county dailies Axel Springer, the private news agency Havaria Press and the news radio Inforadio were unwilling to answer questions. The regional news and talk radio Klubrádió, the local news radio Gazdasági Rádió, the tabloid *Blikk* and the publisher of several county dailies Pannon Lapok (Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung) also declined to respond despite repeated efforts. The nationwide commercial television channel TV2, the nationwide radio station Sláger Rádió, the nationwide broadsheet *Népszabadság*, the political-economic weekly *HVG* and the online news magazine *Stop.hu* cooperated with the survey.<sup>19</sup>

The objective of this paper is to identify “good practices” in the media business in order

<sup>18</sup> Bodoky, Tamás and Endre Dányi, “Új média” (“New media”), in Péter Bajomi-Lázár (ed.), *A magyarországi média a késő Kádár-kortól az ezredfordulóig (The Hungarian media from the late Kádár-era to the Millennium)*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, forthcoming in 2005.

<sup>19</sup> I wish to thank Áron Monori for his great help in conducting the interviews.

to point out the responsibility of media owners and managers for increasing the quality of their products. It must be noted, however, that the identification of “good” and “bad” practices may run into methodological differences. A strictly consistent approach would raise the question of whose perspective is considered, especially in such a diverse field as the news media. In this field, at least five major entities must be considered: the public, owners, journalists, advertisers and the political elites. These interests may differ significantly. For example, the greatest possible transparency of the activities of the political and business elites is in the public interest, while the political and business elites may want to keep their secrets. Journalists are in the most troublesome position in this respect: they are supposed to be loyal both to the public and their employers while, at the same time, maintaining good connections with the political elites and advertisers as well. From the possible approaches, this paper adopts the “social responsibility” model,<sup>20</sup> i.e. the view that the media are more than a business or a tool of political communication; they are, first and foremost, supposed to serve the public interest. Yet, even within this approach the question of what serves the public best might be raised. In other words, the best alternatives in media policy and journalistic self-regulation are best suited for academic discussion,<sup>21</sup> as the impact and efficiency of various practices is difficult to assess. For this reason, the findings of this paper need to be treated accordingly.

### III. Competition framework

The political transformation in 1989–90 put an end to the monopoly of the state in both printing and broadcasting. The launch of newspapers no longer required permission, but simple registration. The first local private broadcasters were licensed. The information monopoly of the *Hungarian Wireless Agency* (MTI), the distribution monopoly of Hungarian Post and the supply monopoly of the Paper Production Company were abolished.

At the same time, however, new regulation was needed to ensure the plurality of the printing and broadcasting markets. The Competition Act, passed in 1996,<sup>22</sup> has no special provisions regarding the press and the media. However, the law stipulates that in some well-defined cases concentration of undertakings must be authorised by the Office of Economic Competition.<sup>23</sup> The Broadcasting Act forbids vertical concentration: no one can own or have a controlling interest in both a nationwide newspaper and a nationwide television channel or radio station. Similarly, no one can own both a county newspaper with a circulation of more than 10,000 copies and a broadcaster in that paper’s circulation area.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the ownership rules of the Broadcasting Act stipulate that one person or organisation may have no more licences than for (1) one nationwide broadcaster or (2) two regional and four local broadcasters or (3) 12 local broadcasters.<sup>25</sup> However, the Broadcasting Act does not limit horizontal concentration. In recent years, several local

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Siebert, Fredrick S., Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm: *Four Theories of the Press*. University of Illinois Press, 1956.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Humphreys, Peter J.: *Mass media and media policy in Western Europe*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996; Hutchison, David: *Media Policy. An Introduction*. Oxford, UK and Malden, Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell, 1999; McQuail, Denis and Karen Siune (eds) *Media Policy. Convergence, Concentration and Commerce*. London: Sage, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Act LVII. of 1996 on the Prohibition of Unfair and Restrictive Market Practices.

<sup>23</sup> Gálik, Mihály, “Hungary”, in Petković, Brankica (ed.) *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2004, pp. 198–199.

<sup>24</sup> Act I. of 1996 on Radio and Television, art. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Act I. of 1996 on Radio and Television, art. 86 (5).

radio stations have joined one of two major, quasi-nationwide networks, Juventus and Rádió 1.<sup>26</sup>

Despite legislative efforts to prevent concentration, the media markets are highly concentrated in terms of audience and advertising share. As media economist Mihály Gálik notes in a study published in 2004:

[anti-concentration measures] do not have too much effect in practice in the Hungarian broadcast market, since the two national commercial television channels ... combined had almost a 60 percent audience market share in 2003 ... and an even higher share, 90 percent or so, of the advertising market... The figures for the two national commercial radio channels broadcasting under the brand names *Danubius* and *Sláger* are somewhat lower (estimated at about 50 percent of audience share ... and more than 60 percent advertising share) so one can say that those four commercial channels dominate the Hungarian broadcast market.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, experience has shown that, paradoxically, anti-concentration measures can actually enhance concentration, as a recent case illustrates. The multinational media company Bertelsmann had a controlling share in both the nationwide broadsheet *Népszabadság* and the nationwide commercial television channel RTL Klub. The National Radio and Television Board (ORTT) found this a violation of the Broadcasting Act. Upon the resolution of the regulatory body,<sup>28</sup> Bertelsmann sold some of its shares in *Népszabadság* to Ringier AG.<sup>29</sup> As a result, Ringier came to have a controlling interest in two of Hungary's four nationwide broadsheets, namely *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Hírlap*. Finally, in late 2004, it closed down *Magyar Hírlap*, and there remained but three broadsheets on the market (however, *Magyar Hírlap* was re-launched a few weeks later by a new owner).

As noted previously, the biggest obstacle to the true plurality of the media is the small size of the Hungarian market. The relatively small population and its limited purchasing power are insufficient to sustain enough television channels, radio stations and newspapers. The major commercial broadcasters offer the same kind of entertainment programmes (soap operas, feature films, pop music, quiz and talk shows, etc.). While 19- to 49-year-old mainstream audiences are well catered for, the various minorities are rarely served at all, especially in rural areas. The same holds for the newspaper market. Views such as criticism of the prevailing liberal capitalist system are rarely given a voice in the daily press.

#### IV. Ownership and its impact on media professionalism and independence

In order to ensure the transparency of ownership, all business entities must register at one of the courts of registers, where ownership data are accessible to the public at no charge. But, no legal provision stipulates that newspapers display their ownership structure on their pages. This makes it difficult for the average reader to see the organisational ties of the publication they are reading.

In addition, broadcasters are obliged to notify the ORTT of changes in their ownership

<sup>26</sup> See also Bajomi-Lázár, Péter, "Status of Journalism in Hungary", in Johannes von Dohnanyi and Christian Möller (eds), *The Impact of Media Concentration on Professional Journalism*, Vienna: OSCE, 2003, pp. 135–137.

<sup>27</sup> Gálik, Mihály, "Hungary", in Brankica Petković (ed.) *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2004, p. 194.

<sup>28</sup> Resolution no. 1130/2001. (VIII. 28.).

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed description of the case, see Gálik, Mihály, "Hungary", in Petković, Brankica (ed.) *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2004, pp. 196–197.

structure. Such changes are contained in the annual reports that the board delivers to Parliament<sup>30</sup> and are also accessible on the website of the regulatory authority.<sup>31</sup>

However, it is assumed that publishers and broadcasters, especially minor ones, tend to “forget” to report changes in their ownership structure to both the courts of registers and the ORTT.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these obligations, the transparency of ownership structures in the Hungarian print press and broadcast media is rather limited in the sense that there are few newspapers, broadcasters or online publications which reveal their ownership structures on their pages or websites. As a result, only journalists and academic researchers are aware of these organisational ties.

Of our respondents, the nationwide commercial television channel *TV2* publishes ownership data on its website,<sup>33</sup> while the nationwide commercial radio station *Sláger Rádió* does not. The biggest nationwide broadsheet *Népszabadság*, the political-economic weekly *HVG* and the online magazine *Stop.hu* also fail to publish such data in print or online. However, when major changes occur in its ownership, *HVG* issues press releases.

The lack of transparency of ownership and, consequently, of the potential political affiliations of the various media outlets, might be one of the reasons for the declining social prestige of the Hungarian media. In 1989–90, journalists scored 73–75 points on a 100-point scale of social prestige. By the mid-1990s they scored 49–54 points, and their prestige rating has remained about the same since then.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, a representative opinion survey conducted by the NGO Hungarian Press Freedom Centre (Sajtószabadság Központ) in the summer of 2001 showed that only four percent of the adult population trusted journalists entirely; 40 percent trusted them a little; 37 percent distrusted them a little; and 13 percent distrusted them entirely.<sup>35</sup>

It can be argued that journalists, publishers and the political elite consider the Hungarian newspaper and broadcasting industries either an additional sphere for political battles or mere businesses, while the above-mentioned “social responsibility” model has not taken root. In fact, journalism has no widely accepted standards in Hungary. This may be explained by the coexistence of at least three journalistic traditions. First, there is “engaged journalism”. Those subscribing to this model consider themselves opinion makers and use journalism as a means of mobilisation for various politicians and causes. Second, there is the tradition of “neutrally objective journalism”. Its proponents consider journalism a means of unbiased public information. Third, is “global tabloid journalism”, whose subscribers consider journalism a means of mere entertainment (see also section VIII).<sup>36</sup>

Most people agree that Hungarian journalism is only halfway to true professionalism. For example, investigative reporter Éva Vajda and media researcher Ildikó Kaposi describe

<sup>30</sup> E.g. *Beszámoló az Országos Rádió és Televízió Testület 2003. évi tevékenységéről*, Budapest: ORTT, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <http://www.ortt.hu/ogyb.htm> (accessed 3 June 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Gálík, Mihály, “Hungary”, in Brankica Petković (ed.) *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2004, p. 199.

<sup>33</sup> The information can be downloaded from <<http://www.tv2.hu/cikk.php?cikk=100000101940>> (accessed 16 July 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Závecz, Tibor, “Főszerepből karakterszerp. A média presztízse a magyar lakosság körében 1988 és 1998 között” (“The prestige of the Hungarian media with the Hungarian population 1988–1998”), in Erika Sárközy (ed.) *Rendszerváltás és kommunikáció (Political transformation and communication)*, Budapest: Osiris, 1999, pp. 87–90.

<sup>35</sup> Bajomi-Lázár, Péter and Bajomi-Lázár, Dávid, “Újságírók és újságolvasók. A közvélemény a magyarországi sajtóról” (“Public opinion about the Hungarian press”), in *Médiakutató*, winter 2001 (vol. II. no. 4.), p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> On journalism traditions, see also Kunczik, Michael, “Media and Democracy: Are Western Concepts of Press Freedom Applicable in New Democracies?”, in Péter Bajomi-Lázár and István Hegedűs (eds) *Media and Politics*. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2001, pp. 76–77.

the major deficiencies of journalism in Hungary as follows:

- Journalists tend to rely on official news resources, allowing the political elite to manipulate information.
- Many Hungarian journalists are freelancers working under *ad hoc* contracts. In legal terms, they are self-employed. This means that they are paid by the page, which enhances the quantity, rather than the quality, of their work.
- Also, because many journalists are self-employed, the borderline between their public and private responsibilities is blurred. Many of them are underpaid and must do extra work, such as consultation for various business organisations and government agencies. This undermines their legitimacy as independent ‘public watchdogs’ of the business and political elites.
- Another result of widespread freelancing is that journalists do not feel obliged to observe codes of ethics – provided, of course, that there are such codes in the newsroom.
- Leading journalists are part of the country’s elite; they attended the same schools as political leaders and maintain good relations with them. As a result of this close relationship, the political elite can quite easily prevent the release of information that would put them in a bad light.
- It is a widely shared belief, although unproven, that every journalist has a price: corruption seems to be widespread.
- Journalists are overburdened with work and have no means to conduct in-depth background research for their articles or programmes.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, media researcher Miklós Sükösd points out that:

- Even when corruption is revealed, there is normally no follow-up to the story to keep the audience informed.
- Information on most corruption cases is unearthed by political competitors (who forward information to the press), rather than by independent journalists.
- Newspapers, broadcasters and online publications cannot afford to pay investigative journalists, who often must spend weeks or months on a single story.
- Journalists frequently fail to double-check information or to seek balancing views. Even when asking all parties for comment, they fail to contrast assertions with facts and therefore to offer readers or broadcast audiences a clear context for interpretation.
- Many journalists are uninformed of their legal rights of access to public information.

These problems call for a professional discussion and the establishment of codes of ethics to set standards of conduct for journalists. Few media outlets have such codes, and the few codes that exist are hardly accessible to the public.<sup>38</sup> An exception to this rule is the joint code of ethics of the country’s major journalists’ associations, including the Hungarian Journalists Association (MUOSZ), the Hungarian Journalists’ Community

<sup>37</sup> Vajda, Éva and Ildikó Kaposi, “Etikai dilemmák a magyar újságírásban” (“Ethical dilemmas in Hungarian journalism”), in Miklós Sükösd and Ákos Csermely: *A hír értékei. Etika és professionalizmus a mai magyar médiában (The values of the news. Ethics and professionalism in the Hungarian media)*, Budapest: Média Hungária, 2001, pp. 29–39; Vajda, Éva, “Közeg és szakma” (“Context and profession”), in Miklós Sükösd and Ákos Csermely: *A hír értékei. Etika és professionalizmus a mai magyar médiában (The values of the news. Ethics and professionalism in the Hungarian media)*, Budapest: Média Hungária, 2001, pp. 155–161.

<sup>38</sup> Szűcs, László, “Médiaetikai kódexek a mai Magyarországon” (“Codes of media ethics in present-day Hungary”), in Miklós Sükösd and Ákos Csermely: *A hír értékei. Etika és professionalizmus a mai magyar médiában (The values of the news. Ethics and professionalism in the Hungarian media)*, Budapest: Média Hungária, 2001, pp. 71–82.

(MUK), the Hungarian Catholic Journalists Association (MAKUSZ) and the Press Union (*Sajtószakszervezet*), which was passed in September 2000, albeit without binding force.<sup>39</sup> Online content providers have also passed a joint code that binds all those who subscribe to it.<sup>40</sup> The scarcity of codes of ethics is all the more problematic as such codes would serve the purpose of discouraging professional misconduct, improving public trust, defending journalists against their employers when they cover controversial issues, increasing solidarity among journalists and preventing restrictive regulation by the political elite.<sup>41</sup> However, it should be noted that codes of ethics may not resolve all of the problems associated with journalism in present-day Hungary. The efficacy of professional codes is limited to journalists who actually follow them.

Other means of journalistic self-regulation are not very widespread. The employment of in-house Ombudsmen to discuss readers' complaints, to enhance professionalism and to improve contact with audiences is practically unknown in Hungary. Currently, there is one single outlet, *Magyar Hírlap*, which since March 2005 has employed an in-house Ombudsman. Since then, the Ombudsman has discussed several controversial cases on the pages of the daily; his reports are also accessible on the newspaper's website.<sup>42</sup>

Professional awards have been established in an attempt to enhance quality journalism. These include the Pulitzer Memorial Award, the Quality Journalism Award and the Soma Award.<sup>43</sup>

To enhance professionalism, several books on the standards of neutrally objective journalism have been translated and published.<sup>44</sup> However, Hungary has no journalism review (such as the *American Journalism Review* or the *Columbia Journalism Review*) providing space for informed debate on the profession.

In order to protect the independence of journalists and to enhance professionalism, several non-governmental organisations have been established since the political transformation. The first such organisation, the Openness Club (Nyilvánosság Klub) has distinguished itself by various forms of protest when journalists' right to access information has been curtailed.<sup>45</sup> The Hungarian Press Freedom Centre has prepared several analyses of journalists' performance, also available on its website.<sup>46</sup>

Journalism education has been launched on a massive scale, with several colleges and universities offering journalism training from the mid-1990s. There are also independent organisations such as the Centre for Independent Journalism (Független Médiaközpont) that provide journalists with education and training. The first few generations of students have only recently graduated and, because few of them are in senior positions, the impact of journalism education on professionalism cannot be assessed as yet. Education may enhance professionalism in the long run. Analysts suggest that one of the major reasons for the deficiencies of journalism in present-day Hungary can be explained by the fact that, until the

<sup>39</sup> The full text of the code can be downloaded from <<http://www.muosz.hu/alapszabaly.php>> (accessed 5 July 2005).

<sup>40</sup> The code can be downloaded from <[http://index.hu/mte\\_kodex/mte\\_kodex.doc](http://index.hu/mte_kodex/mte_kodex.doc)> (accessed 5 July 2005).

<sup>41</sup> For more on the benefits of codes of ethics, see Bajomi-Lázár, Péter "A politikai újságírás normái Magyarországon" ("Norms of political journalism in Hungary"), in *Mozgó Világ*, February 2002, pp. 64–65.

<sup>42</sup> See <[http://www.magyarhirlap.hu/Ombudsman\\_index.php](http://www.magyarhirlap.hu/Ombudsman_index.php)> (accessed 12 August 2005).

<sup>43</sup> See <<http://www.pulitzer.hu/tort.htm>>, <<http://www.minosegiujsgiras.hu>>, <<http://www.gsoma.hu>> (accessed 12 August, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Rivers, William L. and Cleve Mathews, *Médiaetika (Media ethics)*, Budapest: Bagolyvár, 1993; Burgh, Hugo de (ed.) *Oknyomozó újságírás (Investigative journalism)*, Budapest: Jászöveg Műhely Kiadó, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> <<http://www.nyilvanossagklub.hu/kozjogi/kozjogi19950630.shtml>> (accessed 13 August 2005).

<sup>46</sup> <<http://www.sajtoszabadsag.hu>> (accessed 13 August 2005).

political transformation, there was no journalism education in the country (apart from the MUOSZ journalism school). Young journalists were trained by older ones in newsrooms, often in a less-than-professional manner. Because of their careers under state socialism when they served as the “party’s soldiers” with an exaggerated respect for authority, journalists have little experience of questioning authority. Furthermore, the lack of professional education in previous decades has resulted in the absence of a sense of community or solidarity among journalists, as a result of which they do not act together when they come into conflict with the political elite.<sup>47</sup>

## V. The funding of the media business

All media outlets must submit an annual report of their income to the State Tax Authority (APEH). The data thus gathered are accessible to the public. According to a recent study published by the Hungarian Advertising Association (Magyar Reklámszövetség), an estimated HUF 154.7 billion was spent on advertising in 2004 (compared with HUF 134.9 billion in 2003). Of this, the television industry had a share of 41 percent, the print press 39 percent, outdoor advertising nine percent, radio eight percent, the internet two percent and cinema one percent. (For the actual sums, see Table 6.)<sup>48</sup>

**Table 6. Estimated net advertising expenditure in 2004**

	Listed prices (billion forints)	Estimated net expenditure (billion forints)
Television	286.1	63.8
Print press	98.1	60.3
Outdoor	26.8	13.6
Radio	26.5	12.5
Internet	no data	3.5
Cinema	1.3	1

**Source:** TNS Media Intelligence (Médiagnózis), Hungarian Advertising Association

It should be noted that direct and indirect subsidies, especially to the print press, have a long tradition in Hungary. Since the political transformation, various governments have granted either direct support through foundations and banks or indirect support through advertising by state-owned companies in selected political newspapers that support their policies. The allocation of non-transparent subsidies is morally questionable in that it means that public money is spent to promote private political values.

The actual amount of these subsidies can only be estimated. As media economist Mihály Gálik notes in his above-mentioned study, [i]t is not easy to estimate these sums,

<sup>47</sup> Vajda, Éva and Ildikó Kaposi, “Étikai dilemmák a magyar újságírásban” (“Ethical dilemmas in Hungarian journalism”), in Miklós Sükösd and Ákos Csermely: *A hír értékei. Etika és professionalizmus a mai magyar médiában* (*The values of the news. Ethics and professionalism in the Hungarian media*), Budapest: Média Hungária, 2001, pp. 32–39.

<sup>48</sup> Data provided by the Hungarian Advertising Association at <<http://www.mrsz.hu/study.php?cmsseid=Td182b02833c520e285918ab4e4df8561b27a81ae8490c6d0f24ebfbf2f6b4f9>> (accessed 8 July 2005).



but most experts agree that eight to ten percent of the aggregate advertising spending (approximately €500 million in 2002) might be labelled as “driven by non-market forces”... If this estimate is correct, the grey zone of media subsidies has greater weight than the official, by and large transparent, state subsidies in Hungary.<sup>49</sup>

To this it must be added that, unlike in some Scandinavian and South American countries,<sup>50</sup> Hungary has no press subsidies system to sustain financially unviable newspapers, even though the establishment of an open and neutrally run press fund would make it pointless to fund media outlets for political reasons in a non-transparent way. It is also noteworthy that, according to a recent comparative study, well-designed press subsidies systems in established democracies have contributed to the plurality of the newspaper markets and helped newspapers improve their independence from the political elites; arguably they would have the same impact in post-communist democracies.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding advertising regulation, the law stipulates that ads should be clearly separated from the editorial pages and edited programmes,<sup>52</sup> but the practice of ‘advertorials’ is not unknown in Hungary. The law also prescribes, among other things, that advertisements may not potentially harm minors, incite violence or display pornography. Furthermore, hidden and subliminal advertising is banned.<sup>53</sup> Transgressions are supervised by the Consumer Protection Agency and the Economic Competition Agency. Whether broadcasters respect the quotas for advertising (12 minutes in any one hour or 15 percent of total daily broadcasting time for commercial broadcasters) is regularly monitored by the Monitoring and Analysing Service of the ORTT.

Of our respondents, the nationwide commercial television channel *TV2* publishes a regular financial report on its website.<sup>54</sup> Others, including *Sláger Rádió*, *Népszabadság*, *HVG* and *stop.hu*, do not publish their financial reports, but they are, as ruled by law, accessible at a court of register.

## VI. Separation of editorial and business departments

Of our respondents, *TV2* claims to respect several codes formalising journalists’ conduct and the relationship between editors and the owners, including the Advertisers’ Code of Ethics, the company’s own Journalists’ Code of Conduct, and the Code of Business Conduct and Ethics of SBS Broadcasting. The latter stipulates respect for all laws regarding the operation of the company, and specifies, among other things, conflict of interest rules for employees (with special regard to business activities outside the company). But the broadcaster has neither an ethics commission nor an in-house Ombudsman to discuss

<sup>49</sup> Gálik, Mihály, “Hungary”, in Brankica Petković (ed.) *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2004, p. 200.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Humphreys, Peter J., *Mass media and media policy in Western Europe*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 83–93; Hutchison, David, *Media Policy. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 173–175.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. De Bens, Els and Helge Ostbye: The European Newspaper Market. In McQuail, Denis and Karen Siune (eds) *Media Policy. Convergence, Concentration and Commerce*, Sage, 1998, pp. 13–14; Humphreys, Peter J.: *Mass media and media policy in Western Europe*, Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 102–107. See also Bajomi-Lázár, Péter “Még egyszer a sajtóalapról” (“Do we need a press fund?”), in Mihály Enyedi Nagy, Gábor Polyák and Ildikó Sarkady (eds), *Magyarország médiakönyve 2003 (Annual of the Hungarian media 2003)*, Budapest: ENAMIKÉ, 2003, pp. 365–376.

<sup>52</sup> Act I. of 1996 on Radio and Television, arts. 10–15.; Act LVIII. of 1997 on Commercial Advertising, art. 3 (5).

<sup>53</sup> Act I. of 1996 on Radio and Television, arts. 10–15. ; Act LVIII. of 1997 on Commercial Advertising, arts. 4–6.

<sup>54</sup> The information can be downloaded from <<http://www.tv2.hu/cikk.php?cikk=100000102825>> (accessed 16 July 2005).

controversial cases. Alleged violations of the code must be reported to the company's director of legal affairs.

The management and the editorial staff of this broadcaster are separated in the sense that editors have no representative on the board. Pre-agreed documents stipulate non-interference from the owner in editorial activity. Journalists can be dismissed only when they do not accomplish their tasks, which are mutually agreed upon and clearly documented.

The management of *TV2* also provides legal support to its journalists in the event that investigative reports expose them to external pressure.

As regards *TV2*'s attitude to ethical behaviour, the company's policy is that "credibility is crucial and a very sensitive point in informing the public. Once it is lost, it can take years to rebuild it, [it is] not worth risking."

The station also offers information on its website on its mission and programming policy. Its codes, however, cannot be downloaded. Upon contacting the press officer of the broadcaster, some of the documents can be accessed.

Of the other respondents, *Sláger Rádió* has no code of ethics at all. Its editors have no representative in the board of the company; their working conditions and criteria are specified in a written contract. Asked whether the owner may interfere with editorial activity, a company representative responded that the question was irrelevant. Similar answers were given to questions on how the company encourages investigative journalism and whether it provides its journalists with legal support in the event they encounter pressure. It should be noted, however, that the radio station focuses on entertainment and music and provides political programmes or news only to the extent required by the Broadcasting Act. Journalists can be dismissed only if they fail to accomplish their tasks. As regards the company's attitude to ethical behaviour and transparency, their policy reads: "We believe that our honest and transparent conduct improves our competitiveness."

The nationwide broadsheet *Népszabadság* has a statute specifying the rules of journalists' professional conduct; however, it is not accessible to the public. The 'philosophy' of the newspaper is, however, accessible on its website;<sup>55</sup> this puts forward *Népszabadság*'s general principles such as political independence, neutrality and accuracy, fairness, as well as respect for the basic principles of democracy.

The editors of the broadsheet (who are also minority shareholders in the company) are represented in both the management board and the supervisory committee. Furthermore, editorial independence from the owners is guaranteed by virtue of the above-mentioned statute. The editorial board is independent, the editor-in-chief is elected by the editors and they have the right of veto on the board. Whether and how a journalist can be dismissed is regulated by a collective contract, as well as the individual contract of the journalist. The conditions for dismissal are more favourable for journalists than the law stipulates, said a respondent who, nevertheless, refused to reveal documents showing those conditions. If journalists face pressure, the company provides them with legal support; in some cases, physical protection (i.e. bodyguards) has also been offered. The editorial board recognises the need for ethical behaviour, because, according to their statement, "credibility is a key factor in market success."

The representative of the political-economic weekly *HVG* did not reveal whether the company has a code of ethics, yet the newspaper does have an in-house ethics committee. There is some overlap between the owners and the senior staff of the newsroom. Yet,

<sup>55</sup> It can be downloaded from <<http://www.nol.hu/cikk/93>> (accessed 16 July 2005).

according to the answers given for this survey, the management does not interfere in editorial policy. The newspaper does provide its journalists with a legal defence when necessary. Journalists can be dismissed only they fail to do their job, or by mutual agreement. The conditions for the dismissal of journalists are specified in written form. To a question regarding the attitude of the company to ethical behaviour, we received the answer that there is “no correlation” between ethical behaviour and profitability.

The journalists of the online news magazine *stop.hu* are not members of the management board, nor do they have the right to vote. The editorial management works on a contractual basis, and some of them are also stakeholders in the company. Editorial independence and non-interference on behalf of the owner in editorial activities are guaranteed in official documents. Journalists can be dismissed only if they fail to accomplish their tasks, usually specified in a written contract. In some cases, however, there is only a verbal agreement specifying the journalist’s tasks.

*Stop.hu* provides legal support to its journalists when necessary. The standards expected are specified in a statute as well as a code of ethics, based on the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ Statement of Principles. The code of ethics of the magazine is accessible on its website.<sup>56</sup> To the question regarding the company’s attitude toward ethical behaviour, we received no answer.

As the low number of respondents indicates, many media entrepreneurs do not seem to recognise the importance of improving their transparency and accountability in the view of their audience in order to increase public trust, even though declining circulation figures and social prestige are a sign that, if they wish to preserve their market positions, they must do so in the future.

## VII. Individual rights and editorial freedom

Collective protection of the Hungarian journalism community is largely hindered by the fact that journalists are extremely divided along political lines. This is demonstrated by, among other things, the existence of rival journalism associations, frequently associated with the political left (such as MUOSZ) and right (such as MUK). The political division of the journalism community is a major obstacle to the rise of the professional solidarity that would enable journalists to unite and resist political or business pressure. However, in addition to journalists’ associations, there is an independent Press Union that aims at protecting journalists’ interests, especially against their employers (see below).

MUOSZ, the biggest professional organisation, comprised of 7,000 journalists, launched a Code of Interest Protection in 1999.<sup>57</sup> Since then, some 15 professional organisations have endorsed it. The code aims to ensure freedom of opinion; it also includes a proposed tariff of honoraria for the various journalistic professions, updated on an annual basis, and has special provisions regarding copyright issues.

It has also established an Interest Protection Committee gathering media lawyers and other professionals delegated by the general assembly of MUOSZ to mediate in the event of a conflict of interest between journalists and their employers. If the Interest Protection Committee of MUOSZ perceives, on the basis of written complaints, repeated violations of the code by a media company, it initiates consultation with that company, and proposes measures to correct the questioned practice.

<sup>56</sup> <<http://www.stop.hu/alapelvek.php>> (accessed 16 July 2005).

<sup>57</sup> The full text of the code can be downloaded from <<http://www.muosz.hu/kodex.php?page=erdek&sub=erdekk1>> (accessed 11 July 2005).

The code also stipulates that after the publication of journalistic work that has been accepted by a communication or media company, the possible debates, legal consequences, payment of damages or other obligations are to be handled by that communication or media company. In practice, this responsibility means that if a lawsuit is launched against a journalist, the communication or media company must provide him or her with, or finance, legal representation, and must pay any damages awarded by the court.

Judit Acsay, head of the Interest Protection Committee, said that since its establishment in 1999, it has mediated in 80–100 cases; mediation by the Committee has been a success in some 75 percent of all cases.

Most complaints have to do with non-payment for submitted work. While multinational companies tend to pay their employees normally, smaller enterprises, including both Hungarian and foreign ones, quite frequently fail to do so. Some 20 percent of all complaints were submitted against the public service broadcasters *Hungarian Television* and *Hungarian Radio*, and the rest were against private companies. According to Acsay, the committee addresses but a small percentage of the actual cases, as many transgressions of contract are not reported. Journalists submit complaints to the committee on censorship issues, but in a very limited number of cases, especially in the event their publisher pressures them to write “advertorials”. The committee has never run into any case of political pressure.

The committee publishes a report of its activities in the *Annual of MUOSZ (MÚOSZ Évkönyv)* without, however, providing exact data or names of those involved in cases. The report is not available on the organisation’s website.<sup>58</sup>

According to Péter Ránki, a member of the executive committee of the Press Union, it became an independent organisation after the political transformation and has an estimated 2,000 members working for the print press. Any journalist may join, regardless of his or her membership of other professional organisations or trade unions. It aims to enforce and protect journalists’ interests vis-à-vis their employers. It provides its members with, among other things, free legal advice; occasionally, it also sues employers if they fail to meet their contractual or legal obligations. The number of court cases is fewer than ten per year. Members of the union submit complaints regarding financial matters, especially non-payment of fees, as well as substandard working conditions and work overload. Most of the complaints are submitted against small companies, whereas the big – and profitable – firms tend to respect laws and contracts.

In addition, the Press Union negotiates wages and collective contracts with employers. It also negotiates with the government on the employment status of journalists in an attempt to increase the number of full-time employees since the Hungarian tax system prompts many journalists to work under *ad hoc* contracts without other legal protection. Paradoxically, however, full-time employment for all journalists would impose increased costs upon employers, and would lead to massive dismissals, as well as extra work for those who kept their jobs.

The union magazine, *Sajtóvilág*, is delivered to its members every second month and discusses union activities. But such information is not always accessible on its webpage.<sup>59</sup>

As Péter Ránki has further noted, the circulation of the quality press has declined worldwide, including in Hungary, as a result of which journalists have been losing jobs on a massive scale. Those retaining their position, however, are required to do more work, thus

<sup>58</sup> Personal communication by Judit Acsay, 26 July 2005.

<sup>59</sup> See <<http://www.sajtoszakszervezet.hu>> (accessed 11 July 2005).

decreasing the quality and performance of the press. Declining quality and performance, in turn, bring about a further decrease in the circulation of quality newspapers: a vicious circle<sup>60</sup>.

Regarding journalistic freedom, some data have been gathered as part of a representative opinion survey conducted by sociologist Mária Vásárhelyi and the Communication Theory Research Group among journalists in 2000. The study was part of longitudinal research also carried out in 1992 and 1997. Survey findings reveal that from 1992–2000 journalists' safety declined even though their revenues increased and are now higher than that of the average intellectual. In 2000, one journalist out of three was a freelancer with no regular contracted employment, and one in two was a member of a journalists' association. The study also reveals that journalists were increasingly satisfied with their working conditions (for details see Table 7).

**Table 7. Satisfaction with working condition among journalists 1992–2000<sup>61</sup>**

	1992	1997	2000
Atmosphere in the newsroom	66	61	68
How interesting the work is	79	77	75
How much help one is provided with	49	52	56
Physical environment	62	61	62
Personal behaviour of colleagues	76	70	72
Professional level of colleagues	n.d.	64	69
Payment	57	49	54
Democracy in the newsroom	67	60	63
Professional level of superiors	67	66	72
Human conduct of superiors	70	69	74
Potential for professional career	60	55	58
Potential for financial career		44	48
Social benefits		40	44
Chances to travel abroad	42	34	39
Average satisfaction	63	57	61

**Source:** Mária Vásárhelyi (2000)

Mária Vásárhelyi and her colleagues also asked their interviewees several questions regarding their professional autonomy. Their major findings are as follows:

- 40 percent of journalists felt vulnerable to their employers;
- 56 percent said that, when making decisions in the newsroom, the economic interests of the owners must be considered;
- 42 percent said that the interests of the major advertisers were given consideration in the newsroom;
- 21 percent said that the interests of the government of the day have an impact upon

<sup>60</sup> Personal communication by Péter Ránki, 26 July 2005.

<sup>61</sup> 1 point: not satisfied at all, 100 points: very satisfied.

the decisions made in the newsrooms;

- 49 percent have encountered political pressure (and two out of three attempts to influence the political elite's media coverage was reported to have been successful);
- 49 percent have encountered pressure by business elites to prevent the release of information;
- 29 percent have encountered some kind of personal threat because of the planned release of information, and only half of them believed the media outlet they were working for supported them in the conflict to the full;
- 85 percent said they were completely free to select their sources of information;
- 71 percent said that they were completely or mostly free to choose the topics they covered;
- 64 percent said they were entirely or mostly free to comment on events;
- 73 percent entirely or partly agreed with the statement: "the overwhelming majority of journalists still apply self-censorship."<sup>62</sup>

In short, the working conditions and the performance of the journalistic community in Hungary seems to fall short of both public expectations and the journalists' self-imposed standards.

### VIII. Media – a profit-oriented business with a responsibility to the public

As stated, the most frequently discussed ethical issues include the violation of personal rights, the representation of ethnic and national minorities and conflict of interest rules. "Tabloidisation", especially the depiction of violence and pornography, has also been a widely discussed question.<sup>63</sup>

The most salient issue, however, is bias in the news. The existing codes of ethics, as well as the Broadcasting Act, are a reflection of objective journalism, whereas, as indicated earlier, Hungarian journalists tend to be partisan. Instead of fact-based journalism, opinionated journalism prevails in Hungary. Rather than independent public watchdogs of democracy, journalists tend to consider themselves public intellectuals promoting a cause or ideology. Whether they are critical to or loyal of the incumbent government depends on who is in office. Journalists apply double standards, and reality is covered in a largely selective way: they tend to use only information that fits their message and to ignore facts and opinions contradicting their point. They do not mean to inform but to convince and mobilise voters. The whole range of opinions cannot normally be learnt from one single media outlet, i.e., there is no internal pluralism, even though the entire spectrum of the print press and the broadcast media represent a fairly wide spectrum of opinions.<sup>64</sup> The major contradictions between normative standards and practice can be summarised like this (see Table 8):

<sup>62</sup> Vásárhelyi, Mária, "Újságírókutatás 2000" ("An opinion poll among journalists 2000"), *manuscript*, Budapest: 2000.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Fletcher, Charles and Péter Pallai, *Visegrádi irányelvek. A magyar rádiós és televíziós újságírók önként vállalható etikai kódexe (The Visegrad guidelines. The voluntary code of ethics of Hungarian radio and television journalists)*. BBC World Service Training, 2000; Horvát, János, "Etika, jog, újságírás, média" (Ethics, law, journalism, and the media") in Miklós Sükösd and Ákos Csermely Ákos (eds) *A hír értékei (The values of the news)*, Budapest: Média Hungária Könyvek, 2001, pp. 50–55.

<sup>64</sup> For more on this, see Bajomi-Lázár, Péter "A politikai újságírás normái Magyarországon" ("Norms of political journalism in Hungary"), in *Mozgó Világ*, February 2002, pp. 64–65.

**Table 8. Normative standards and practice of journalism in Hungary**

	<b>Standards</b>	<b>Practice</b>
Political orientation	impartial	partisan
Representated values	basic democratic values	one particular ideology or party
Coverage of reality	representative	selective
Plurality	internal	external
Relationship to the government	critical	loyal or critical
Function of journalism	information	mobilisation
Role of journalist	public watchdog	public intellectual
Major content	fact	opinion

Some reservations, however, must be noted regarding this model. Since the political transformation, there has been an increasing number of media outlets that abide by the norms of neutrally objective journalism, including, especially, the nationwide commercial television channels and radio stations, as well as the county daily papers, although arguably these outlets tend to be increasingly apolitical rather than politically neutral.

The fact that, unlike in most Western European countries, objective standards of journalism have not taken deep roots in Hungary is not easy to explain. One possible explanation is that the public sphere in Hungary, just as in several other post-communist democracies, is largely over-politicised. Unlike in many of the Western European countries where the major political parties are centrist, the Hungarian political elite is deeply divided ideologically. Only 15 years have passed since the political transformation, and no consensus has emerged on major social, economic and political questions. In this heated atmosphere, many people do not seek information but orientation: they want the print press and broadcast media to reinforce their pre-existing loyalties and opinions — and journalists abide by this public expectation by covering public events in a biased manner. Efforts to establish politically neutral titles have failed due to lack of public interest. Similarly, efforts to invite columnists with a different perspective have failed because of protest by the audience.

The tension between ideals and practices has given rise to concern among journalists, as indicated by the growing number of conferences and publications devoted to ethical issues in recent years; however, the division of the journalistic community along ideological lines seems to be a major obstacle to the rise of a consensus on ethical behaviour within the profession.

## **IX. Conclusions**

A major finding of this paper is that many representatives of the media companies were reluctant to answer our questions. Whether this reluctance is explained by the fact that they had something to hide or were simply unwilling to take time to answer is hard to tell. It is, however, a sign that they are not committed to, or do not recognise the importance of, the transparency of the industry; nor do they value the role of ethical behaviour in enhancing public trust in the media. The “social responsibility” model has not taken root in Hungary.

Transparency is limited even among companies whose representatives answered our questions. Their codes of ethics are, in most cases, inaccessible to the general public. Moreover, even the various organisations that try to enhance journalists’ interests fail to ensure the visibility of their activities.

The few answers that we received are also a sign that some media outlets, especially the bigger ones owned by multinationals, specify working conditions for their employees in written form, either through individual or collective contracts or other documents such as codes of ethics and editorial statutes. The formalisation of the employer/employee relationship may be considered a good practice as it stabilises interaction and introduces some kind of a “rule of law”. At the same time, because of the Hungarian tax system, many journalists are freelancers whose relationship to their employers is little, if at all, formalised. Because many of them are not members of any of the professional organisations, their interests are not protected — all the more so, as, according to analysts, few of them are aware of their rights.

The Hungarian journalism community is arguably only halfway to professionalism. The press and the broadcast media have low prestige and little trust among their audience. The reasons for such a poor performance are multiple. One is the small size of the Hungarian market: few media outlets, if any, can afford to pay their journalists well, and even fewer can afford to employ investigative journalists. As a general rule, journalists are overburdened and have no time to do a thorough job. The widespread practice of freelance journalism does not encourage performance either, as freelance journalists are paid by the page, which enhances quantity rather than quality.

In recent years, Hungarian journalists have made efforts to enhance professionalism and to regain their reputation among the public. Journalist associations have adopted codes of ethics specifying standards of work. One newspaper, *HVG*, has an in-house ethics committee. Another, *Magyar Hírlap*, has an in-house Ombudsman. Massive journalism education and the publication of literature on professional issues have also been launched in recent years. Whether these efforts will enhance professionalism and have an impact upon the reputation of the media is not yet apparent.

## X. Recommendations

The independence of journalism and journalists is largely a question of money, as there is no political independence and guarantee of survival without economic independence. Furthermore, media outlets remain exposed to political pressure as long as audiences do not support them fully as an independent and reliable “fourth estate”. For this reason, the following recommendations can be made:

- The Hungarian government should set up a press subsidies system that supports loss-making political newspapers on a politically neutral basis and in a transparent way and encourages investigative journalism.

- The various media outlets need to improve their transparency, i.e. pass codes of ethics and make them accessible to the public in order to show responsibility and improve public trust.

- The various media outlets and journalist organisations must make sure that journalists observe the existing codes of ethics. Violations of the codes should be discussed publicly; in particular, the decisions of the ethics commissions should be given more publicity.

- The various media outlets and journalist organisations should establish in-house press Ombudsmen in order to discuss controversial cases of ethics in public, and to mediate public expectations with journalists.

- The journalists’ organisations should reveal more information on negotiations with media owners on their employment conditions to exert pressure on the owners to engage in ethical practices.



## Appendix: List of sources

### Legislation and statistics

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