

Donath Business & Media
In cooperation with MRThink

Czech journalists' views on selected aspects of the Czech media environment

Survey final report
July 2012

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Foreword

Free media play an important role in the cultivation of an open and democratic society. However, individual publishers are commercial or public entities, more or less obliged to play by the rules of the market. The entire media environment is changing significantly with the development of information technology. Moreover, it has been affected recently by a dramatic slowdown in economic growth. This has also translated into cuts of advertising budgets, as well as growing concern on the part of media owners and shareholders about the profitability of their businesses. Editorial staffs have shrunk while demands on journalists have grown. Outside pressures have added to this. Therefore, we have focused our survey on journalists' current view of the key factors that affect their work.

DBM conducted a similar survey in Slovakia in 2008. We have left the structure of the questionnaire virtually unchanged for the sake of comparability. Although four years is a relatively long time in today's world – given that such sources of information as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter had only just made it on to the news scene at the time – such a comparison can help to ascertain trends or cultural differences.

We approached more than 2,500 journalists across the Czech media spectrum, inviting them to take part in the survey. We also decided to address all journalists from economic to political and foreign news desks to sports departments. We appreciate that almost 22% of those invited shared their views with us. Thanks must go where thanks are due. We appreciate the trust and candor of all the respondents who decided to participate in our survey.

Together with the final report, we also publish for the first time the complete source data of the survey (available at www.dbm.cz). We believe this is important, not only to keep our promise to the journalists addressed, but, more importantly, because the data offers valuable information to media researchers, as well as PR workers and the reporters themselves. We will be glad if our efforts contribute to the discussion of some matters touched upon in the survey.

The DBM Team

‘Blame the PR agencies,’ they say

I have worked in PR for 22 years. For that entire time, I have heard controversial comments about the industry, from “wag the dog” to “spin doctors,” despite consistent efforts by individuals and professional associations to improve the image of the industry. I keep asking myself what we in PR are doing wrong. Are we building castles in the clouds for our clients just because they want to have them in the media, and, still more important, see themselves in the media?

Corporate and personal ego surfing are as popular as golf in business circles. People simply want to see themselves in print. Those who aren’t in the media don’t seem to exist at all. The way to get there is left up to PR. This is why they are here, they say; the client has nothing to do with it. I have therefore gotten the impression lately that PR took over the mission of the woman whom the devil sends where he cannot travel to himself. This, however, is not how things should be. In my humble opinion, PR agencies should serve as a useful additional source of information that the media can and should handle according to their own judgment, ideally assisted by common sense, and all this regardless of time constraints for professional verification.

Miloš Zeman gained notoriety by his expressively negative statements about reporters and their output. In his recent statements, they are no longer “idiots” and “prostitutes” but there are some “poorly educated journalists” among them. I would not wish to read a similar statement about PR guys just because of their ethical or professional faults. This is why PR agencies should not prostitute themselves just to meet the (often quite unrealistic) expectations of their clients. The consultant should have the courage to stand up to his client even at the risk of losing him should the client’s requests be unacceptable for reasons of media and industry ethics. Professional honor is not measured by revenue or profit.

Our recent communications survey tried to map out the situation in the Czech media world, specifically, how it copes with current economic pressures. Public relations is a relations-based business, and those relations ought to be developed professionally between both the journalists and PR professionals regardless of time and the individual’s position on either side of the media barricade. The trust our respondents expressed by filling out our questionnaire seems to prove, I think, a mutual respect. I really appreciate it.

Michal Donath

Goals of the survey

The survey was intended to map out Czech journalists' views of key aspects of the media environment, adding to earlier such efforts in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We wanted to find what most significantly affects the quality of media output and where the boundary is between acceptable and unacceptable behavior of PR agencies¹.

Survey parameters

DBM conducted the survey from June 4 to June 17, 2012, using an Internet questionnaire on the SurveyMonkey.com platform. The questionnaire was available only to journalists working in the Czech Republic, invited by means of personal e-mail messages.

Respondents

A total of 2,577 active journalists were invited, of whom 566 (22%) took part in the survey. Defined as active journalists were those who authored and published or broadcasted no less than four media outputs, monitored by Anopress/Newton agency, in the past three months (i.e. from March 1 to May 31, 2012). Having an editorial e-mail address was an additional condition for being listed in the database.

The survey included respondents from national and regional printed media, radio, television and Internet news bulletins in the Czech Republic. The respondents represented an ample spectrum of departments from domestic to business and foreign news desks up to sports. For detailed information about the respondents' profiles, see pages 18–20 of this report.

Declaration of free distribution

This study is intended for free distribution. Quotes should cite © 2012 Donath Business & Media as the source.

Source data

For a complete set of the collected data, see www.dbm.cz/pruzkumy/english/, or read the QR code.



¹ DBM conducted a similar survey in Slovakia in 2008 in cooperation with Slovak Press Watch. The final report of the survey with results for comparison is available at <http://www.dbm.cz/pruzkumy/english/?id=123&opinions-of-slovak-journalists-on-selected-issues-concerning-the-media-landscape-in-slovakia>

Key findings

Greater interest than expected

A total of 566 respondents answered the electronic survey in June, which represents 22% of the 2,577 invited active Czech journalists.

Negative factors influencing the quality of media output

Seventy percent of the respondents believe the main negative impact on media quality is the low level of expertise among journalists. This self-critical voice was louder than those decrying such external factors as pressure from advertisers (67%), senior editors (64%) or media owners (59%). Low ethical standards of journalists were mentioned by 60% of the respondents as an issue influencing the current quality of Czech media. The survey shows that journalists perceive pressure from politicians and government officials as much less important than pressure from businesses.

The pressures journalists face at work stem mostly from senior editors for economic reasons (75%), as well as from the low level of expertise (77%) and low ethical (67%) standards of journalists. Sixty-five percent of the responding journalists personally experienced pressure from senior editors concerning the styling (tenor) of texts, compared with 49% faced with similar pressures from PR agencies, 46% from advertisers and 33% from media owners. Although journalists personally experience pressure from PR agencies as often as from advertisers, they see pressure from advertisers as having a more important negative impact on the quality of the media.

Take no bribes, take no bribes, take no bribes!

Eighty-two percent of respondents view an invitation to a press conference that includes the opportunity to take part in a ski trip as a gift, while 81% think the same of an invitation to an international football match, and 73% think the same of winning a camera in a raffle at a press conference. Most respondents know quite well about the trickiness of accepting gifts as the reporter's independence is at stake.

Forty-two percent of the journalists polled flatly declined to accept gifts. The matter is more complicated for the others. A moderate majority replied that their reaction depends on the value of the gift, the circumstances of the donation and the reason behind it.

Seventy-one percent of the respondents say their editorial office adopted rules of approach to "motivational" offers from companies or PR agencies. The question still remains as to why almost half of the respondents are unsure and answer "somewhat agree." Some journalists believe their publication has some kind of rules but are not familiar with them.

According to the respondents, the most frequent providers of gifts are firms in the tourist industry, followed by pharmaceutical and telecommunications companies, makers of branded consumer goods, banks and insurance companies; automotive and IT companies are a little less generous. Government institutions occupy the other end of the spectrum.

The reporters' views concerning gifts and their effects are quite polarized. The answers to two key questions, i.e. "gifts, or no gifts?" and "to what extent do gifts affect the Czech journalist community?" are split almost exactly into two groups: Nearly half of the respondents decline gifts, while a slight majority claims it depends on how much, from whom and for what reason. Similarly, almost half of the reporters believe gifts do influence most of them, and the other half considers them as a minority phenomenon.

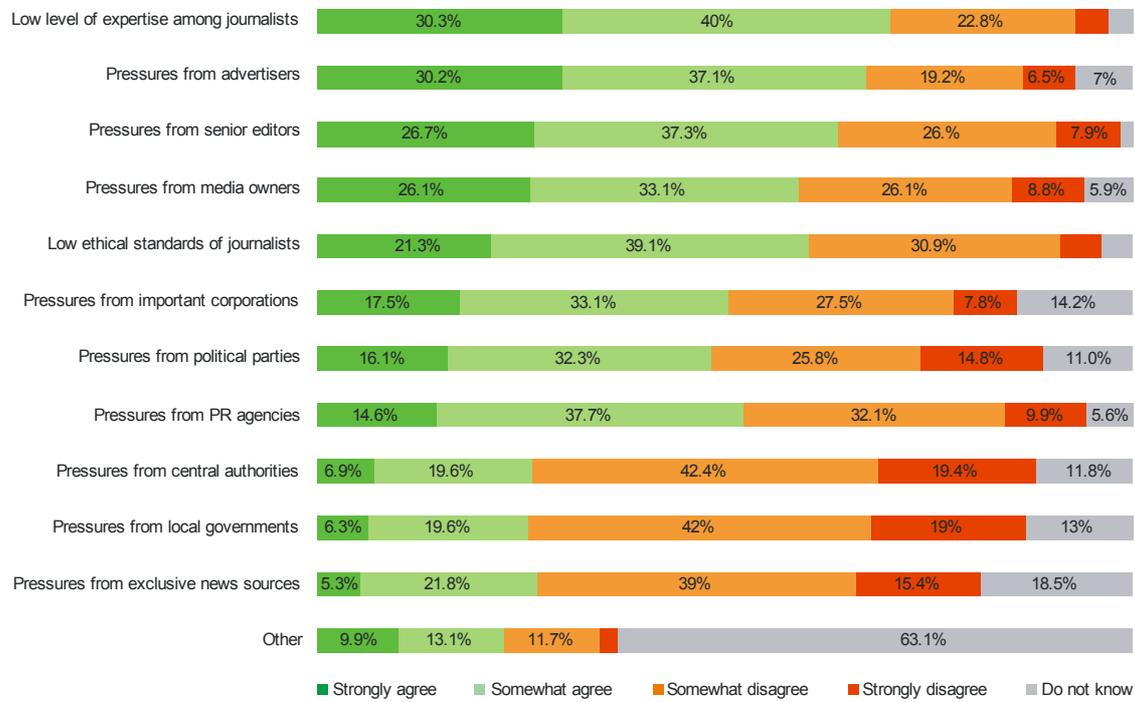
Annoying practices

Answering the question concerning the least ethical practices of PR agencies, the winner was surprisingly the request to send the story or report for pre-print approval (64%), followed by phone queries about whether and when the reporter will publish (54%), while a mere 30% considered offers of gifts as the least ethical practice.

We advertise; so say good things about us!

Question 1:

Do you think any of the following factors with the potential to negatively influence the quality standards of Czech media exist in the Czech Republic?



Seventy percent of the respondents believe the low level of expertise of journalists is the single most important negative factor affecting media quality. This self-critical voice prevailed over all other external factors that are the subject of day-to-day discussions, such as pressure from advertisers (67%), senior editors (64%) or media owners (59%). Low ethical standards are considered by as many as 60% of the respondents an issue with a negative influence on the quality of Czech media. The results also show that pressure from politicians and government authorities are much less significant than pressure from businesses, which is one of the key differences in comparison with the 2008 Slovak survey. In our view, the country specifics, rather than the time shift, account for the difference.

Mentions of pressures from various advertisers were among the journalists' most common reactions to the survey.

"[There occur] pressures of the kind, 'If you don't write positively about us, we'll withdraw advertising,' or, 'If you write something unfavorable, we'll withdraw advertising.'"

"Some people tend to think that, having promised an ad, they've bought the paper."

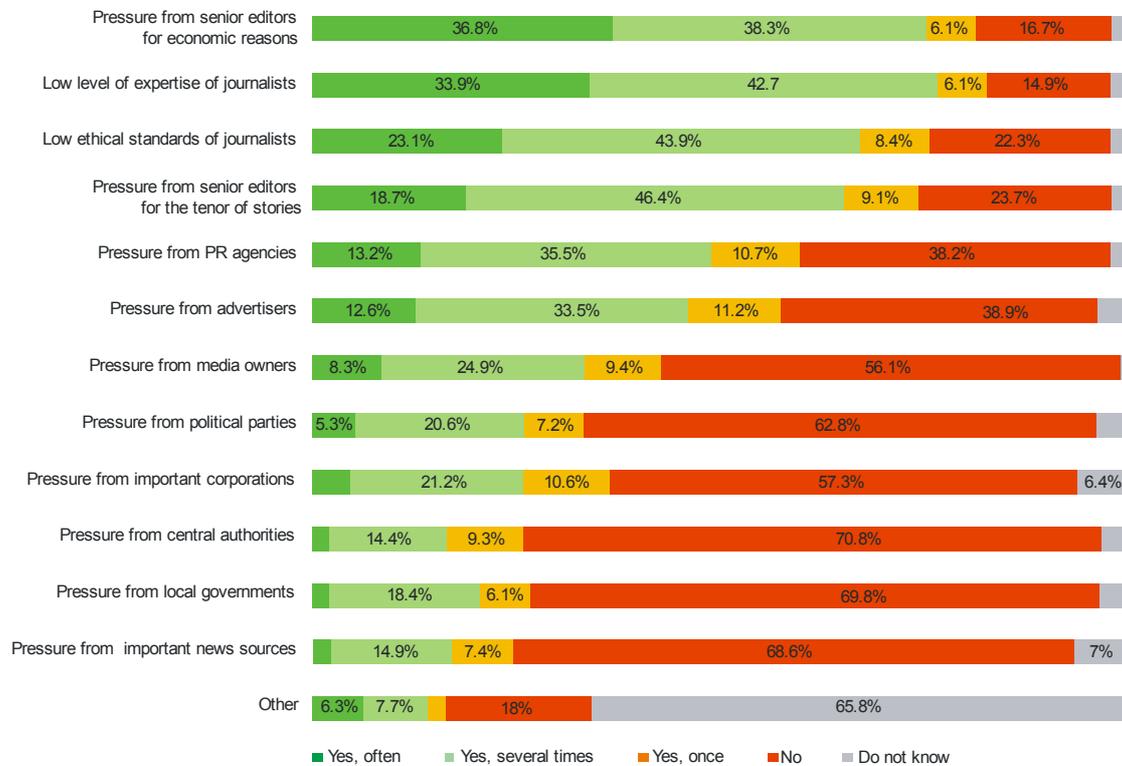
Every coin has two sides. Other journalists, quoting examples of the least ethical media behavior they have experienced, mentioned pressure from media against advertisers: "Media ignore companies, individuals, hotels, etc., which do not advertise in them." "[The least ethical is] pressure on advertisers that, unless they advertise, they will not get much coverage," or "I find it unethical when companies that have placed ads are promised additional services on top of the reporter's duties – e.g. stories about the firm printed on general news pages without making it clear that it is PR."

Another respected journalist from an influential economic daily wrote in his e-mailed response to the survey as follows: "Without attempting at simplification, money is the greatest problem of journalism. Low budgets mean less time to process stuff, the employment of inept individuals and a greater willingness to accept 'gifts.'"

Self-criticism above all

Question 2:

Have you ever been confronted with any of the following phenomena?



While in the first question, the journalists were to weigh which of the listed possible pressures or professional weaknesses negatively impact media quality, here they were to assess the frequency of the same array of factors, based on their own experience.

The majority of the reporters encountered problems directly related to the journalistic profession itself “several times” or “often.” These included pressures from senior editors for economic reasons (75%) as well as low levels of expertise (77%) and ethical standards (67%) of the reporters. To complete this type of issue, 65% of the responding journalists experienced pressure from senior editors for the tenor of their texts “several times” or “often.”

The list of the least ethical practices on the part of Czech media, as reported by the respondents, includes overdramatizing, lies, publication of unverified news, bias, hyenism and the reluctance to admit one’s own fault.

“I do not like excessive emotions, which may, especially at an Internet news service, lead as far as to provoking hysteria against certain individuals and subsequent witch-hunts, as in the cases of Mr. Lacina, Bohumil Kulínský or the girl who kicked her horse several times, as well as claims, unfounded by evidence, that police found child pornography in the home of Mr. This or Mr. That, though no investigation has been completed.”

Another type of “pressure,” i.e. that reported by less than half of the respondents, was pressure from PR agencies (49%), advertisers (46%) and media owners (33%). In this relation, a comparison with the previous graph is quite interesting, showing that although the journalists have equally frequent experience with pressure from PR agencies and advertisers, they see the negative effect of pressures from advertisers on the quality of the media as far more significant.

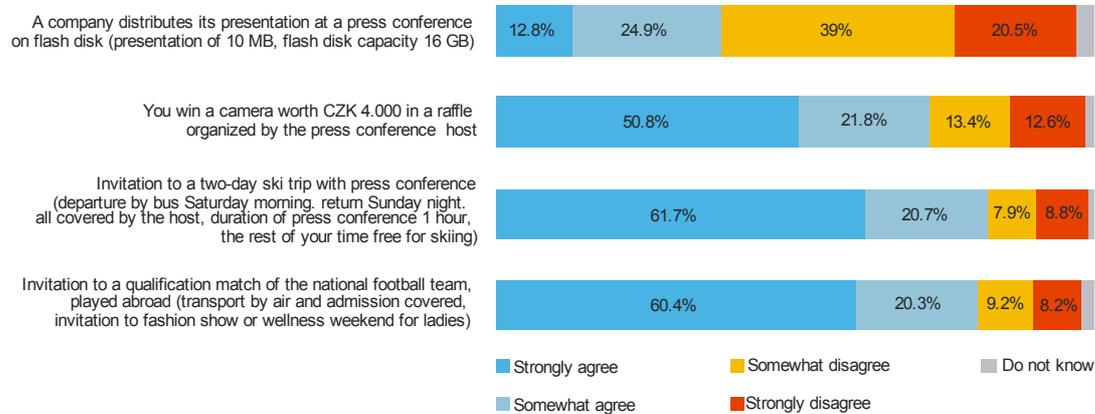
A number of reporters mentioned pressure from PR professionals for authorization of stories or reports among the most common evils: “[In my view, the least ethical thing is] the attempts by PR agencies to check the media picture of their clients, [when they] demand the media product prior to publication for checks and amendments,” wrote a respondent.

Compared with a similar survey conducted in Slovakia in 2008, Czech journalists are slightly more (self-) critical about their own low level of expertise. The comparison of the two surveys is interesting from one more point of view: the question concerning “pressure from senior editors” was split in the Czech survey by reason of whether the pressure was motivated by economic reasons or the desired tenor of the text (a form of editing). Only about one-third of the respondents in Slovakia in 2008 claimed “pressure from senior editors,” as compared with more than double that in the Czech Republic in 2012. This may be a consequence of the economic crisis, which increased financial pressures.

And the trip to Kenya goes to...

Question 3:

Do you see the offers listed below as gifts?



Accepting gifts is a matter of ethics in any profession. It constitutes a dilemma for journalists as well as for politicians or doctors. Moreover, it is sometimes socially unacceptable to decline a gift.

A great majority of respondents see all the offers listed as gifts with the exception of the flash disk.

“You cannot decline a larger flash disk, because you need the data on it for your work, and you cannot get it otherwise.”

Eighty-two percent of respondents consider an invitation to a press conference combined with a ski trip as a gift; 81% think the same of an invitation to a football match abroad; 73% think the same of winning a camera in a raffle at a press conference. The majority of respondents understands the trickiness of accepting gifts and the fact that the reporter’s independence is at stake very well.

Judging by the responses in the survey, trips are among the most common potentially corrupt practices. We registered a total of almost 40 spontaneous reactions in which the reporters claimed hosting trips abroad as a deplorable practice. Working media trips during which the reporters learn interesting information that is helpful to their work are considered an acceptable exception.

“The distribution of highly valuable and expensive gifts in order to influence the reporter’s opinion and consequently the opinion of the public is [the least ethical practice], e.g. we give the reporter a trip for his whole family, and he will write a positive story about our travel agency.”

“Luxurious trips abroad and other corruptive behavior in order to positively influence one or more journalists’ opinion about a specific matter.”

“Sending a gift voucher worth CZK 10,000 to buy a trip abroad.”

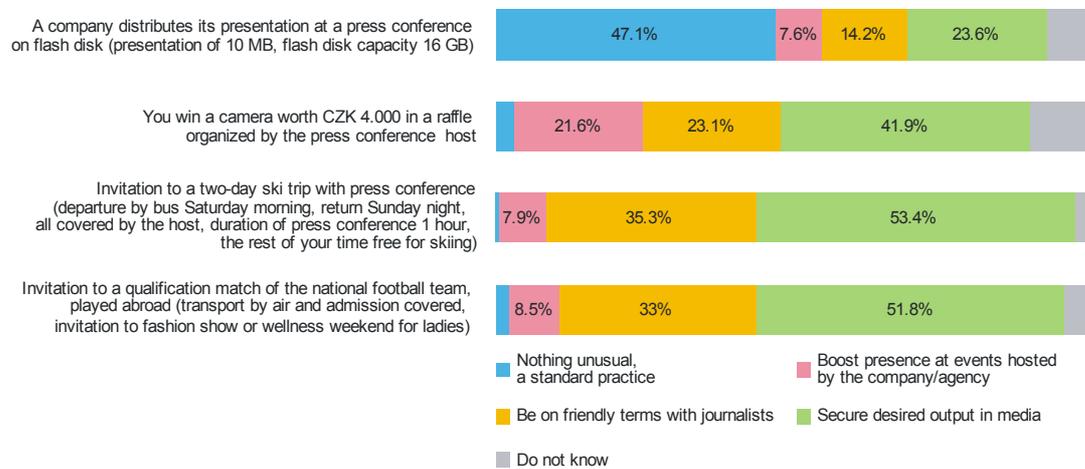
“An invitation by the government to a trip abroad, expecting a positive report.”

“It is trips either in the country or abroad that I find especially suspicious. If it is an invitation to a fair or a tour of nuclear power plants, it makes sense as long as you learn new information that you could hardly obtain otherwise. Likewise, if there is no evident pressure from the organizer for certain publicity. I understand there is sometimes no other way to get relevant information. The media do not have the money to send a reporter to, say, Finland to visit power plants. Yet the matter itself is interesting. If the reporter adds his own findings to the information gathered during the trip in order to avoid one-sided information, then I think one cannot speak of an unethical pressure. But it always takes human and journalistic integrity not to succumb just to the information presented and to verify it from other sources.”

Thanks, and what do you expect from me?

Question 4:

What do you think is the reason for firms and PR agencies to offer benefits to journalists in the cases listed below?



“A businessman invited me on a two-day air trip to Cambridge. He (as he said) wanted me to write about what it was like for his daughter to study there. I declined on the pretext that I was afraid of flying.”

“A company wanted to influence a reporter by offering him a job. They wanted him to edit texts for their magazine, for several tens of thousands [of crowns] a month, saying that ‘in fact you don’t have to see most of the stuff at all, as almost all of it is OK.’ They wanted the reporter to give up investigative journalism. It should be said to the reporter’s honor that he declined the proposal.”

What behavior is acceptable in PR? Are there any defining standards?

Yes, PR agencies and in-house PR professionals have relatively clearly defined procedures in relation to the media. These are provided in internationally recognized documents, such as the IPRA¹ Charter On Media Transparency and the Stockholm ICCO² Charter; for the Czech Republic, they include the Code of Ethics in Public Relations, drafted by the Czech professional association APRA³.

The code describes, among other things, acceptable practices for providing products or services to journalists for testing to create informed opinions. The code stipulates there should be prior agreements on the period for which the sample is offered for testing and the return of all products or services at the end of such a period.

From this point of view, one of the journalists was right when he labeled as unfair “allowing the reviewer to keep expensive products (in return for a positive review),” as opposed to another journalist who sees “as unethical any demands for the return of any objects for review.” The two views quoted are in obvious disagreement and show that, at least in relation to product lending, journalists can hold absolutely opposing opinions.

¹ IPRA (International Public Relations Association); for complete version of the Charter, see <http://www.ipra.org/secciones.php?sec=2&subsec=5>

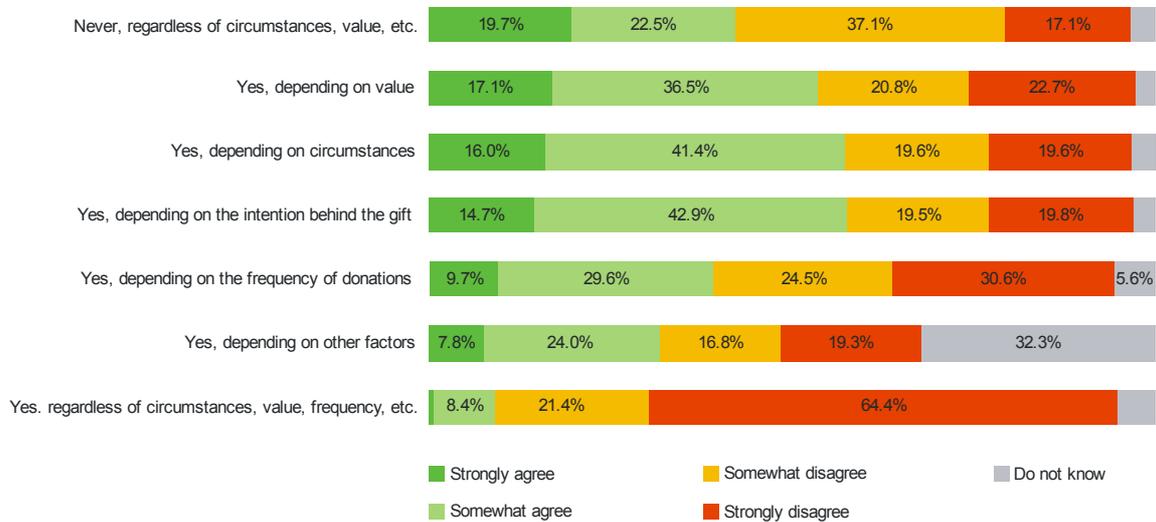
² ICCO (International Communications Consultancy Organisation); for a complete Czech version of the Charter, see http://www.apra.cz/cs/o_apra/eticky_kodex/stockholmska_charta.html

³ APRA (Asociace Public Relations Agentur)

When is it OK to accept gifts?

Question 5:

Do you think it is appropriate for journalist to accept gifts?



Forty-two percent of the respondents flatly rejected accepting gifts. Yet the matter was much more complicated for the rest. A moderate majority – a little more than 50% – replied that it depends on

- The value of the gift,
- The circumstances of providing the gift,
- The intention behind the gift.

The frequency of giving is seen as less important.

Most media have their own codes of ethics. In principle, they are similar, differentiating only in the degree of detail and stringency. The Syndicate of Journalists also has its own code of ethics.

For example, the *Economia* publishing house regards gifts in their code of ethics as follows: “Reporters shall not accept gifts in the course of their work from individuals nor the entities they write about. This does not apply to symbolic gifts or common refreshments. Should it be impolite to decline a valuable gift, the reporter may accept such a gift on behalf of the editorial staff, which shall then donate it to charity. This should be disclosed to the donor while accepting the gift.”¹

The code of ethics for the companies of the Ringier Axel Springer Media AG provides: “An employee may accept such gifts, benefits or invitations that are adequate and common in the country where he/she works; such gifts and attentions are typically regarded as acceptable, which can be consumed within a day.”²

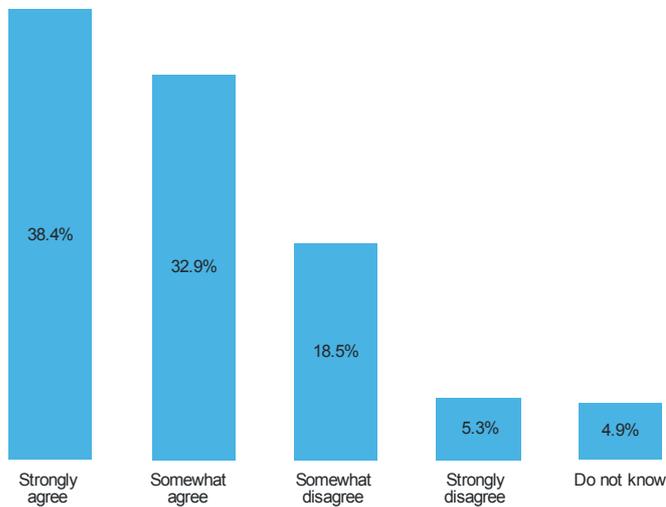
¹ Source: Code of ethics of publishers *Economia* is available at <http://economia.ihned.cz/403/1109/file/>

² Source: the code of ethics for the companies of the group Ringier Axel Springer Media AG is available at <http://img.blesk.cz/static/pdf/78/5/2/785251.pdf>

The rules are set, but who knows them?

Question 6:

Does your editorial staff have clear rules of handling corruptive proposals from individuals, firms or PR agencies?

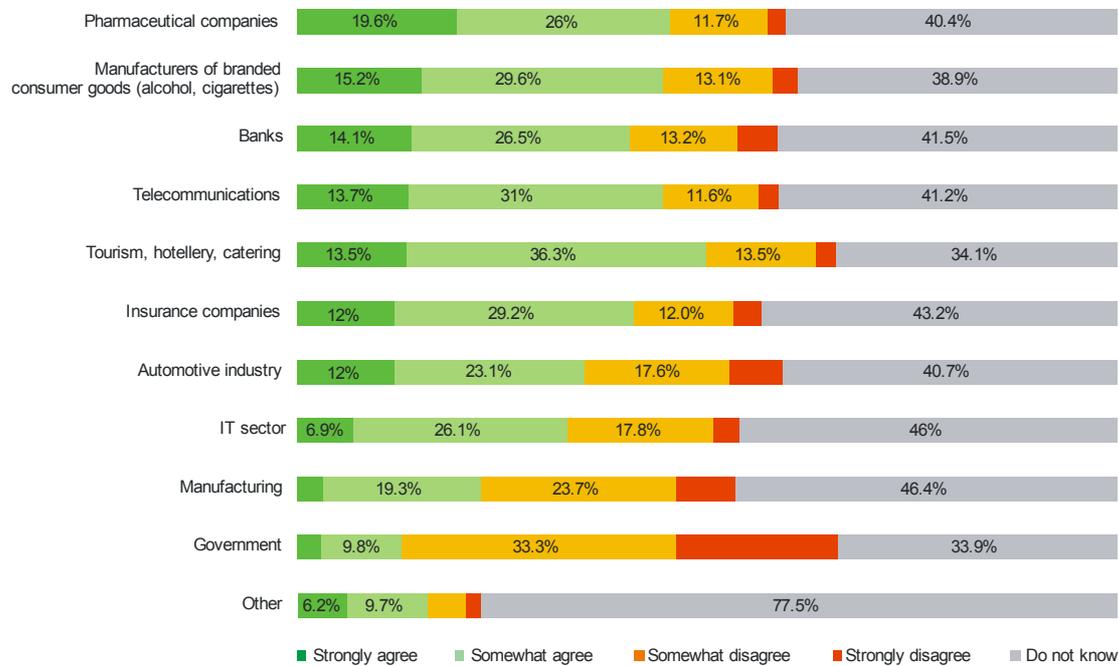


Seventy-one percent of the journalists report that their staffs do have such rules. The question nevertheless remains why almost a half of them are unsure and answer “somewhat agree.” Some journalists probably know there are such rules in their offices but are not familiar with them. This year’s findings in the Czech Republic reflect very faithfully the 2008 results in Slovakia in this regard.

Who offers gifts most often?

Question 7:

Which industries offer gifts to journalists (directly or through PR agencies) most often?

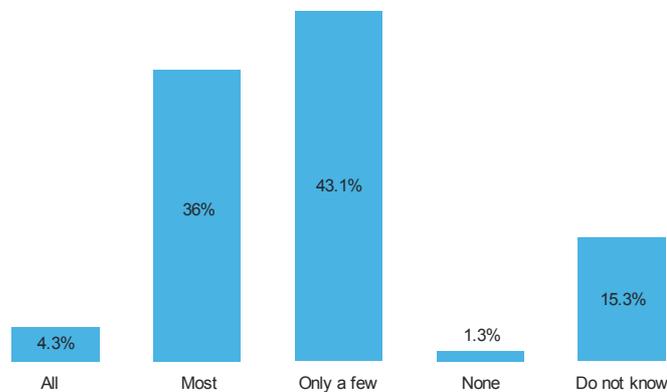


The answers to this question depend on the journalist's personal experience with the given industry. As reporters very often specialize, a large part (34–43%) of respondents opted for “do not know” in answers relating to individual industries. As the answers suggest, the most generous firms are those in tourism (50%), followed by pharmaceutical and telecommunications companies, manufacturers of branded consumer goods, banks and insurance companies, while automotive and IT firms are a little less generous. Government institutions occupy the opposite end of the spectrum. The “gift culture” may differ in different markets. Financial institutions topped the ranking in Slovakia in 2008.

He whose bread you eat, his song you shall sing

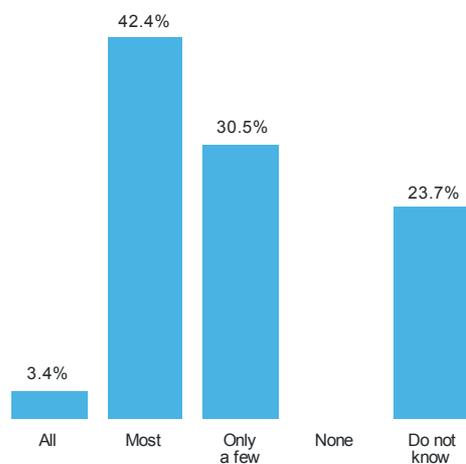
Question 8:

What proportion of journalists do you think are influenced by accepting gifts?

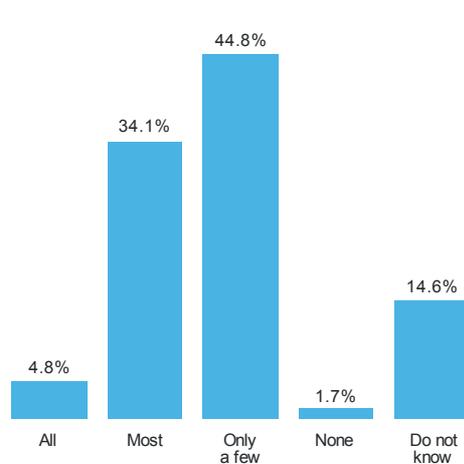


We discuss the issue of gifts in order to access to what extent they affect journalists' independence. Four percent of our respondents believe that every beneficiary is influenced by accepting a gift; 36% think most of them are influenced. The respective opinions differ among the journalists from public and commercial media. Why do the reporters from public media sound more pessimistic? Are their salaries lower?

Public media:



Commercial media:



The journalists believe some other practices they have encountered are also on the ethical edge.

“Valuable gifts at events of the ‘Media Day’ type, where the purpose is not to inform the reporters but to befriend them.”

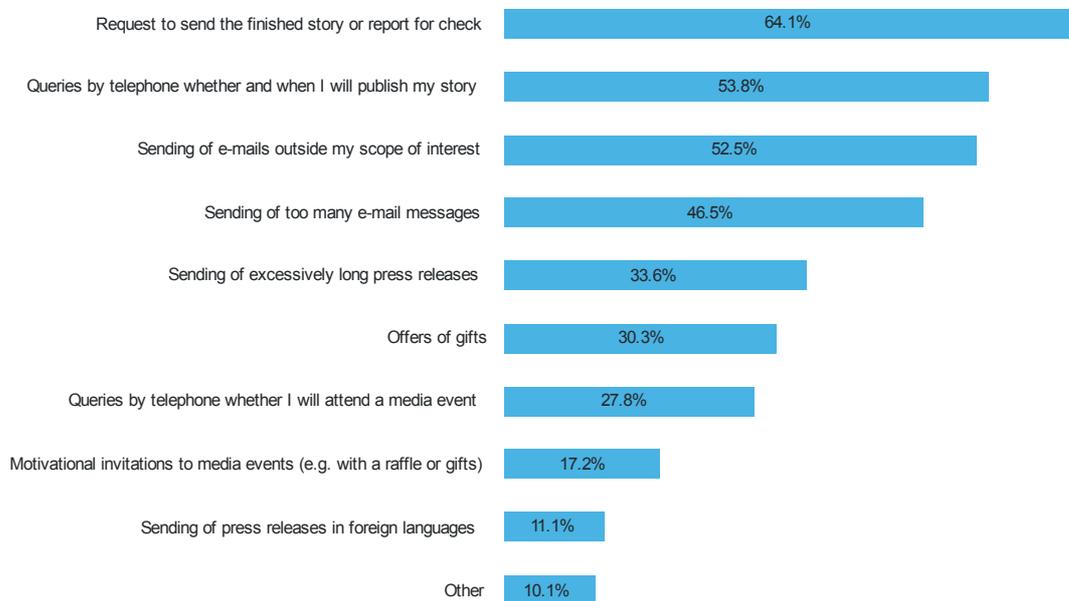
The Pink Panther NGO, which monitors corruption in public administration, criticized some time ago a closed-door dinner for selected journalists, thrown by a large company, at a renowned luxurious restaurant in Prague. According to the NGO, “events [for journalists] should not go beyond the format of a common press conference, open to all reporters, where modest refreshments are served, which are not ostentatious by their nature and do not make the journalists feel obliged to either the commercial or public sector.”¹

¹ Source: <http://www.ruzovypanter.cz/>

PR agencies are not unethical; they are a nuisance!

Question 9:

Please specify examples of practices of PR agencies from your own experience that in your opinion represent the least ethical approach to journalists:



The question may have been posed too critically in relation to the PR industry. This resulted in judging such practices by the reporters in their day-to-day experience as annoying rather than “unethical.” The journalists singled out the request to send the finished story or report for approval as the least ethical practice (64%), while only 30% thought offers of gifts were the least ethical.

Just as it is difficult to insist on the sending of full texts of finished stories or reports for approval, it is impossible to enforce the authorization of texts, interviews or reports. If the journalist accepts the request at all, the amendments on the part of the interviewee should not result in a complete rewriting of the text submitted but rather a correction of factual errors and imprecisions. If someone grants an interview, they should after all know what they are saying and remember it. Demands for authorization of statements on video are in fact a logical nonsense – unless the statement has been significantly altered in the editing room.

Other journalists’ complaints included “phone-call bombardment” and being flooded with purported news items. “Phone queries not from companies but agencies organizing [press conferences]. This is a real nuisance. As soon as the invitation arrives, somebody is on the phone asking if we are sending anyone and who will come. Typically, you have several such calls a day.”

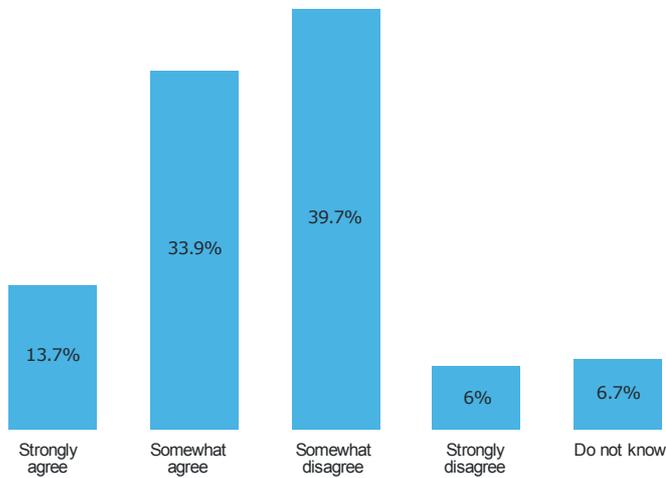
“I have recently experienced strong pressure from PR agencies pressing for publication after I interviewed their client, even if the material is of no interest to me and I have told the PR manager that I am not going to use it anyway.”

“This is more annoying rather than unethical. If I do not reply to an invitation, it means I am not coming. Further queries are pointless. And if I get a news item outside the scope of my interest, it means the young lady in the PR agency did not bother to look at my paper to see what my area of interest is. It is a nuisance. Especially if the press releases from PR agencies are incomplete – for example if, in a release on the acquisition of company X by company Y, the cost of the purchase or profiles of the companies are missing. If the firms do not want to disclose such data, there is nothing to publish, because writing about business without quoting numbers does not make much sense. Most releases from PR agencies need further specification, research, processing, comparisons. And this is worthwhile only in the case of important news, so it makes no sense to send a release to a nationwide paper about a Mr. Stool having made a table at last.”

Will discussion bring about a change?

Question 10:

Do you think discussion of these matters could positively contribute to the development of Czech journalism?



Are Czech journalists rather pessimistic, or rather optimistic, looking at the development of their profession? Our respondents suggest that the two groups are quite balanced. The journalists were moderately optimistic as to whether a discussion of the topics of this survey could positively contribute to the development of Czech journalism.

Some respondents shared with us their views of the current media world and identified some issues.

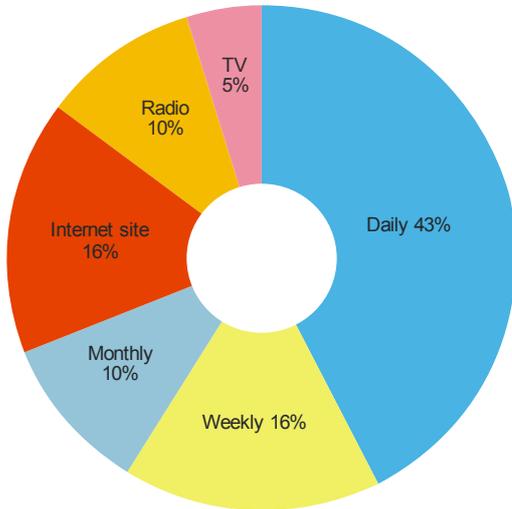
“Attempts at presenting everything as a sensation, including human death. Readership and sales seem to be the only criteria today. The question is to what extent the media reflect the condition of Czech society. If it were mature enough, the media would inevitably have to follow the trend. It is therefore necessary to cultivate the entire society and not just the media and companies.”

“One of my former employers quite openly took compensation for working with private companies on writing their texts. The stories produced in this way and published later were not labeled as advertorials. The same publisher also significantly influenced the tenor of selected texts in favor of certain people and political parties.”

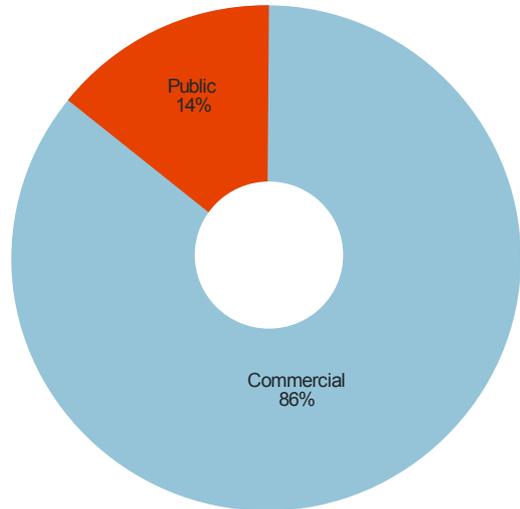
“This is what we call ‘tailoring’: A senior editor acquires information compromising another political figure [other than the source] and hands it over to a rank-and-file reporter saying, ‘This is a bombshell; we’ve got to have in headlines.’ And the eager reporter bites the bait ... But only the first two links of the chain profit.”

Profile of the respondents

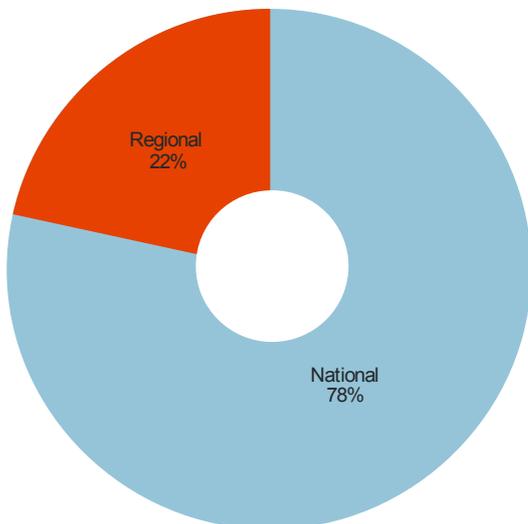
Types of media the respondents work for



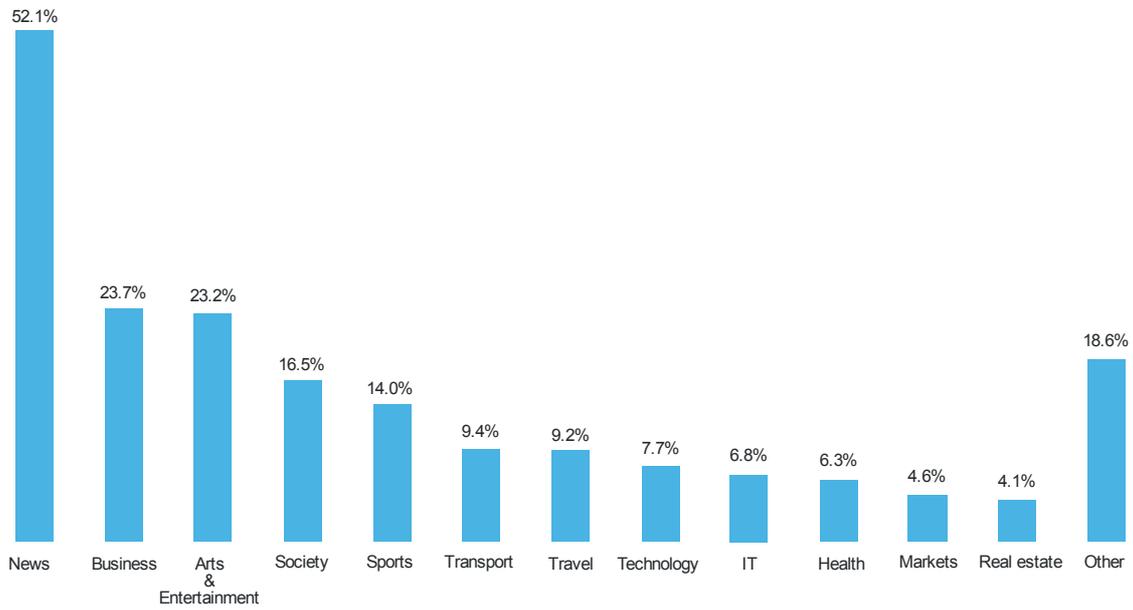
Ownership of media the respondents work for



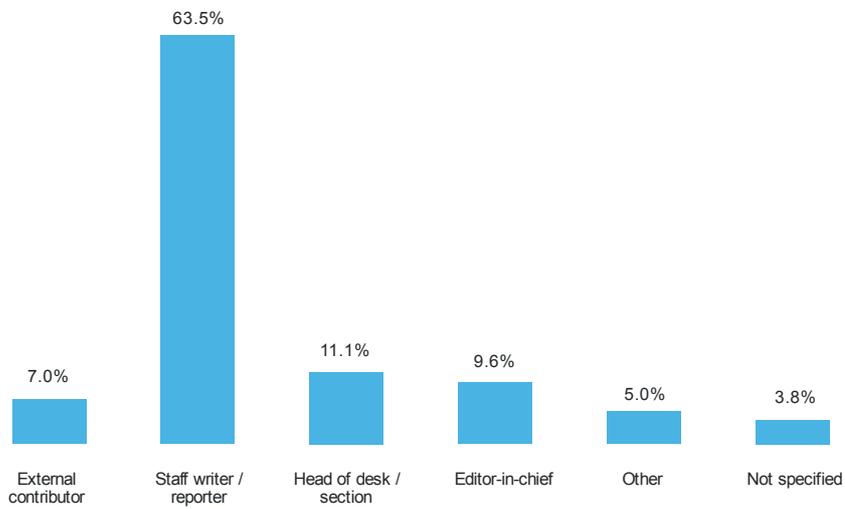
Area of activity of the media:



Key areas of interest:
(each respondent claimed on average two areas of interest)



Positions of the respondents:



Media addressed and numbers of responses

Listed by the domains of the respondents' e-mail addresses.

Publication	Addressed	Replied
denik.cz	455	83
idnes.cz	382	75
rozhlas.cz	235	54
mf.cz	185	11
economia.cz	140	48
ceskatelevize.cz	110	15
topzine.cz	99	26
pravo.cz	91	20
lidovky.cz	79	24
blesk.cz	71	24
halonoviny.cz	70	7
tyden.cz	47	18
aktualne.cz	43	12
mediafax.cz	31	7
sanomamedia.cz	30	10
respekt.cz	29	3
axelspringer.cz/ringier.cz	28	5
nasregion.cz	28	6
nova.cz	23	4
agroweb.cz	22	5
novinky.cz	18	3
burda.cz	17	4
ceskapozice.cz	17	6
metro.cz	17	7
reflex.cz	17	6
profit.cz	15	5
bauermedia.cz	14	2
euro.cz	14	2
iprima.cz	13	4
stratosfera.cz	12	3
motorpresse.cz	11	4
idg.cz	10	2
mobilenet.cz	9	4
sipplus.cz	9	1
ahaonline.cz	5	2
forbesmedia.cz	4	2

Saving the Best for last

As DBM was putting the finishing touches on this report and I was preparing to contribute a comment to it, big things were happening in the global media world. Perhaps the biggest was that Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. was planning to spin off its publishing interests because they have been dragging down its lucrative pay-TV and entertainment business. This split had been rumored for years and, despite Murdoch's phone-tapping scandal in the UK, has more to do with the profits of print media than the morals of it.

Almost as significant as this was the announcement by Fairfax Media of Australia that it was planning to fire a fifth of its staff, close two modern printing presses and put pay walls around the online content of its two flagship newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Melbourne Age. Its CEO, Greg Hywood, said that if circulation continued to fall and advertising didn't improve, the papers might discontinue their print editions and go all-digital.

Something similar was happening in the U.S., where Advance Publications was preparing to take the Times-Picayune of New Orleans from seven days a week to just three and to make staffing cuts to match. This wouldn't have been so unusual if some of the top journalists at the newspaper hadn't decided not to stick around after reviewing the business plan of the new digital-news operation.

The strangest media item that caught my eye was the commotion caused by Journatic, an outsourcing operation that supplies local news to some of the U.S.'s largest newspapers. The commotion arose when it was discovered that some of its news is written on a call-center basis by people in Asia who have nothing to do with the local readers being served. To make it sound more realistic, the Asians were given fake American bylines.

These are just a few of the examples of where the shift in the global media environment is taking us. These cases are extreme by Czech standards, but it's probably only a matter of time ...

The DBM survey shows that 75% of respondents are already feeling pressure from management for economic reasons, but this seems rather gentle compared with what some of their foreign colleagues are experiencing in the U.S., UK and Australia. So far, Czech journalists seem to cope relatively well with the pressure exerted on them. Perhaps they have little choice because of the lack of other opportunities. They are also holding up well to pressure from PR agencies and merely consider them annoying, which is another good sign. What remains to be investigated is the pressure put on the PR agencies by the clients and the ability or inability of the agencies to withstand it.

It's in the interest of all those involved - the journalists, the customers, the PR agencies - to delay the full impact of the global and local pressures as long as possible. The best way for journalists to protect themselves is to return to the basics. That means making sure they know how to write well, have a nose for the news and maintain independence in the face of internal and external pressures. These are skills that have been underemphasized in Czech newsrooms. And hence the opinion of 70% of respondents to this survey that the low quality of the journalists themselves is negatively affecting the media environment.

No matter how much the environment shifts in the coming years, and no matter how much journalism goes digital, there will always be a job for clever journalists who know how to spot a good story and then tell us the who, what, when, where, why and how of it in a clear and concise way.

Erik Best
Publisher of Fleet Sheet and Fleet Sheet's Final Word

About the authors

D|B|M partners in communications

Donath Business & Media has been active in the areas of public relations and public affairs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since 1991. So far, more than 100 Czech, Slovak and international firms have used the services of the agency. Its ample scope of services includes mainly strategic communication consultancy, crisis communication, communications surveys, press services including monitoring and analyses of printed and electronic media, as well as other services in the field of building of the renown of firms and individuals.



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