

INVESTING IN FACTS



It's All about People: Supporting Journalism in Romania

BY IOANA AVADANI

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ROMANIA



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About the Author

Ioana Avadani is the president of the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) in Bucharest, Romania. In 2013, she was awarded the European Citizen of the Year prize of the European Parliament. She has over 25 years of experience in the media field, having worked as a news agency deputy editor-in-chief, a TV editor, and as a media developer with CIJ. As a CIJ director (1998-2019), Avadani coordinated programs ranging from professional training for journalists to strengthening journalists’ associations in Romania. She was instrumental in the passing of critical legislation such as Access to Information and sunshine laws, Broadcast law, Public Broadcast Services and public procurement legislation. She has also been central to the media self-regulation in Romania. In 2018, she was elected president of CIJ’s board for a 5-year mandate.



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Introduction

Romania has “a diverse, relatively pluralistic media landscape”¹ characterized by equally diverse output: from public interest investigations to shallow, sensationalistic, and even faked content.² Still, what may have been a dynamic, thriving sector is an ailing market.

Economic pressure, politically negotiated agendas, and depopulated newsrooms are some of the main problems facing the Romanian media. In addition, systemic issues such as the increasing untenability of the ad-supported business model and the dominance of large platforms also hamper independent journalism.

The last two years, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have brought yet another layer of problems, with authorities increasing their control over information and vigorously promoting “official sources” as the only relevant and reliable ones. Thus, media are seen as merely a transmission belt, an instrument of centralized distribution of carefully crafted messages.



While many issues facing the Romanian media are similar to those in many other countries, the country’s media sector also has several characteristics specific to it. Much of the media is captured by political and business interests, which is reflected in the content published by media outlets. This manifests in visible forms, such as media owners directly influencing content production and certain politicians receiving “protection” in the editorial coverage of various media outlets in exchange for access to public funds that media owners need for other businesses they control.

Romania’s media market is rich and diverse when it comes to the number of competing media outlets, but the advertising market has remained small. Before the economic crisis hit the Romanian economy, the country’s advertising market peaked at €540 million (\$525 million) in 2008, only to fall to €347 million (\$337 million) the following year.³ It was only in 2021 that the market once again came to exceed €500 million (\$486 million), even surpassing expectations to reach €601 million (\$584 million).⁴

The economic decline has forced media outlets to find strategies of survival, such as negotiating editorial content, which is particularly prevalent among local media. Such “editorial content in exchange for money” transactions are not only politically motivated, but extend the friendly or protective practices



A COVID-19 awareness advertisement, part of a campaign paid by the Romanian Government, July 2020.



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to advertisers. The media in Romania have also been marked by the rap sheets of some of the large media players. Owners (direct or beneficial) and sometimes managers of various major media outlets in Romania have served prison terms for a spate of economic crimes including tax fraud, blackmail, Ponzi schemes, and involvement in fraudulent privatization. Moreover, anti-capitalist discourse, already on the rise in Romania over the last few years, intensified as a result of the economic hardships brought about by the COVID-19 crisis.

It is thus no surprise that Romanians' trust in both businesses and the media has significantly eroded. A study conducted by the Romanian Business Leaders Foundation shows that in 2021, 52.9 percent of Romanians didn't agree that "honest people" could succeed in business in Romania, down from 67 percent a decade earlier.⁵ Trust in the media has experienced a similar downfall. Until 2007, between 60 and 80 percent of Romanians trusted the media, with differences across television, radio, and print media.⁶ Trust in legacy media fell to 40-60 percent around 2010, never to recover.⁷ With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation further worsened as trust in the media, be they traditional media or social platforms, dropped dramatically. In 2020, only television had a trust rate of over 50 percent (56 percent) whereas the print and radio segments held 42 percent and 48 percent of the public trust, respectively. Although used as a source of news by a significant part of the population, online media had a meager trust rate of 37 percent.⁸

In such an environment, the relationship between media and the business sector is understandably complicated, with only a few players taking steps to understand each other and seeking ways to cooperate.



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Private Sector Support for Independent Media

Aside from direct ownership, there are other forms of business support for media content. The most common forms are sponsorships of media events and awards for journalists or media outlets. Support for journalism fellowships is rare. One of the best known is the JTI Scholarships for Journalists program, which started in 2000, through which some 250 journalists have benefitted from professional training programs in Brussels.⁹

Companies also occasionally organize documentation tours where they invite journalists, media decision makers (such as directors), or other influencers (such as bloggers). One rather controversial tour was organized by mining company Roșia Montana Gold Corporation as part of its campaign to start a cyanide-based gold mining project in Romania. In 2010, the company paid for 14 highly reputed jour-

nalists to travel to New Zealand to visit, among other places, a gold mining facility that was allegedly using the same technology as the one planned in Romania. The cost of the trip was estimated at €10,000 (\$9,720) per journalist and included treats such as golf games and cruises on luxury boats. Although the involved journalists denied any wrongdoing, insisting that it was a fact-finding trip, public opinion about the visit was very critical. This type of tour is not uncommon in Romania.

Other companies have invited journalists and bloggers to visit their facilities when their products were criticized for faulty quality or hygiene, in a gesture toward transparency. Some tourism companies took journalists to hotels in Turkey to check for themselves the quality of the services they include in their offers. As the PR element of such tours is quite obvious for everybody, journalists and the public alike, they are considered acceptable, as long as the perks are not disproportionately high and the resulting articles are not blatantly laudatory.

Sponsored content has also become an increasingly popular model of attracting corporate money. It consists of published content, sometimes full sections in a newspaper or magazine, that is financially supported by companies. The support is publicized as such, which can trigger public discontent or mistrust. “There is something fishy here,” Claudiu D. Tufiş said in a Facebook post¹⁰ after he counted eight sponsored articles on the homepage of the news portal Hotnews.ro.

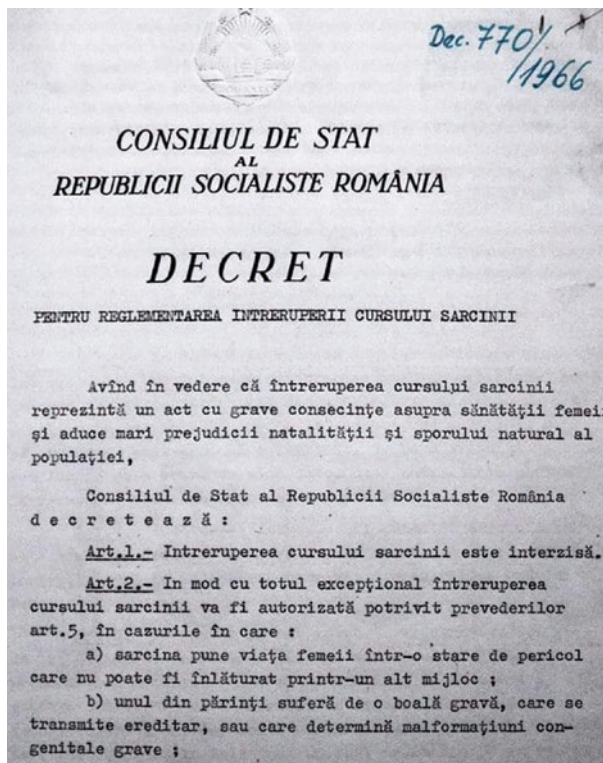
Although these models of private business support to the media have become widespread, we decided to focus in this study on four innovative models of support. The goal of this study is to describe their internal operations and bring to light how the actors involved, businesspeople and journalists, think, interact, and process their shared experiences.



Protesters against the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation's cyanide-based gold mining project marching in Bucharest, September 2013.

The Lone Ranger: A Software Entrepreneur Finances a Journalistic Project on Abortion

Mihai Matei is an information technology (IT) entrepreneur in his early 40s. He is the founding chief executive officer of Essensys Software, vice president of the Concordia Employers' Confederation (Confederația Patronală Concordia), and president of the Employers' Association of the Software and Services Industry (Asociația Patronală a Industriei de Software și Servicii). He also donates to various causes and participates in civic movements, and is one of the founders of Geeks for Democracy, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Romania.



Romania's Decree 770 prohibiting abortions, 1966.

Matei's involvement with journalism began in 2018 when Romania organized a referendum to change the constitution so that same-sex marriage would be impossible.¹¹ The campaign run by the "Yes" camp also included a hard stance on banning abortion, which is what prompted Matei to take action.

He remembered the problems his mother had as a young woman during the communist regime in Romania, which was toppled in 1989, when abortion was punishable with prison time. In a kind of public manifesto, Matei wrote:

My own mother had several curettage abortions as well as three hose [induced] abortions,¹² which she had to resort to because she didn't have the money for a curettage. After the last hose [abortion], she ended up in a coma at the hospital and was very close to death. I remember her taking me into her arms before she was taken to the hospital, and telling me that she loved me. She had the chills, was very pale and could barely speak. I remember the visceral pain I felt and the pit in my stomach. I understood [then]. My mother was dying.¹³

Though Matei's mother survived, the trauma caused by the abortions was multifold, persisting 30 years later. It is conservatively estimated that at least 10,000 women have lost their lives because of unsuccessful abortions since 1966 when the infamous Decree 770 prohibiting abortion by request was passed. Inspired by his mother's experiences, Matei decided "to do something" about it and initiated a multimedia project.

He started by posting a call for stories on this topic on his Facebook account, which received an enthusiastic response from friends, activists, NGO workers, and members of the public. "I received hundreds of messages from people willing to share their stories or contribute. Probably some 30 persons attended the first meeting, all with great and grandiose ideas," said Matei.¹⁴

The group agreed to create a website and publish stories of “mothers, children and those who helped them stay alive” presented in multimedia formats (text, photo, video). The work was to be done on a pro bono basis with only a coordinator to be employed and remunerated. But, in time, enthusiasm diminished and the project—which came to be known as “the Decree Chronicles 1.0”—ended after six profiles had been published.

Dissatisfied but undeterred, Matei analyzed the causes of the apparent failure of the project. “It was the short-term volunteer work [to blame]. People worked on this project when they could, for how long they could. I understand, I do the same,” Matei said. He decided to start over, “with a more transactional, project-based approach.”

Once again, he turned to his Facebook account, this time with a call that had clear terms of participation and a budget coming from his company’s resources.



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Matei chose the Center for Independent Journalism (Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, CJI), a Bucharest-based NGO,¹⁵ and a team of reporters from the independent journalism project Dela0.ro to work on the project.¹⁶ The two organizations had just released a series of articles covering violence against women, an endemic problem affecting families, schools, courts, and child protection organizations in Romania.

“I knew the organizations, I knew the journalists and I was ready to negotiate,” Matei said. The first meetings were quite tense as Matei’s vision of highlighting historical accounts of people affected by Decree 770 clashed with the journalists’ desire to focus on similar stories happening today. In the end, they agreed to cover both angles.

Some tensions arose when Matei insisted on a contract to precisely describe the terms of the project. “The only non-negotiable things were the topic, the

effects of the forced natalist policy, and [an agreement to] have a measurable, itemized deliverable. Everything else was negotiable: the format, the number of articles, the deadlines, the publishing pace. Even the budget. I was much more flexible than in my business,” Matei said.

For some time after the meeting, the two parties, the donor and the project’s editorial and management team, had a hard time understanding each other. The journalists complained about Matei’s abrupt, patronizing style and feared that their work was being undervalued. Matei complained about the lack of rigor and management skills as well as a certain “entitlement attitude” among the journalists. “It is as if their profession is noble and mine is not,” he said.

Matei said that he anticipated such issues, but was prepared to negotiate. He insisted on having a contract to clearly state the terms of cooperation. Following a series of negotiations, which were a good opportunity to clarify the project’s output as well as diffuse tension and clear the air, the contract was signed. After that, everyone became less formal and could adjust the project as needed within the contract’s terms.

The Decree Chronicles¹⁷ (Jurnalul Decretului) project was completed in 2021. It released 14 long-format multimedia pieces of content between October and December 2021, in both Romanian and English. Polish and Hungarian versions were under preparation at the time of writing.

“I insisted on having the copyright for the content. Not for me and my glory, but to protect the project from any attempts at capturing, distorting or silencing it,” said Matei. He is so pleased with the project’s outcome, he said, that he is considering starting a new project, with a similar formula, on an equally thorny topic, yet to be chosen.

“Romanian companies should grow a spine and invest in media projects on sensitive issues that are avoided by mainstream media. They [these companies] have the privilege of freely choosing the topics they support. For multinationals, it is more complicated, the chain of command is too long and they are not connected too strongly to what is happening here. National companies can do it,” Matei concluded.¹⁸

Investing Your Brand: A Bank Establishes Its Own Media

Romanian Development Bank (Banca Română pentru Dezvoltare, BRD) is part of the French-owned Société Generale Group. Apart from its banking activities, BRD is also involved in several cultural and educational projects. One of them seems very unconventional and almost counterintuitive: BRD finances three niche publications. One is dedicated to youth culture (*Scena9*),¹⁹ “*The New Scene*,”²⁰ one to education (*Școala9*),²¹ “*The New School*”), and one to science and technology (*Minecraft Stories*)²².

“It is not CSR [corporate social responsibility]. It is not charity. It is directly investing your brand in things you consider important for the society,” said Vlad Tăușance, MCS’s publisher.²³

Cosmina Frîncu, from BRD’s communications team, agreed that support given to these publications is a brand-related strategy. “We are a development bank; it is in our DNA,” she said. While education and technologies are rather conspicuous pillars of development, culture may be a subtler one, Frîncu added. Culture creates the environment for individuals to thrive in and become “better versions of themselves,” hence an environment for development. “We don’t see our job as spending money to patch things. We want to contribute to growth,” Frîncu said.²⁴

While the three publications form a “micro-ecosystem,” as Tăușance put it, they are independent from each other and editorially independent from BRD. They also have different organizational structures. Established in 2015, *Scena9* was “the ground zero of BRD investment [in media projects],” according to its editor-in-chief, Luiza Vasiliu.²⁵ In 2019, BRD created a foundation, Fundația9,²⁶ as a vehicle used to run *Scena9*, and *Rezidența Scena9*,²⁷ “a space where cre-



BRD Bank of Societe Generale headquarters building, Bucharest, Romania

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ators of contemporary culture express themselves, explore and experiment.” *Scena9*’s core staff are people employed full time by the foundation whereas several other authors are hired as contributors.

Eventually, BRD began to seek ways to extract itself from the “project logic,” providing short-term funding to media organizations to achieve specific goals that may not have a long-term impact on the broader media environment. They saw this approach as fragmented and having limited impact, and so BRD started looking for ways to make more substantial “investment in social [issues],” Vasiliu said. This search led them to *Școala9*, a publication edited by a group of journalists working for *Libertatea*,²⁸ a newspaper owned by Switzerland-based publisher Ringier. “There is a contract between BRD and Ringier; we are Ringier employees, but we work exclusively on *Școala9*,” said Andreea Archip, *Școala9*’s editor-in-chief.²⁹ Its content is republished and promoted by Ringier’s publications, which gives it significant traction.

MCS is managed under a contract between BRD and Friends for Friends Foundation (Fundația Friends for Friends), which employs four full-time journalists and

contributors. The publication is operated as a separate project of the foundation and has its own publisher.

BRD's Frîncu says that they used the "trial and error" strategy to identify the best solution for each journalistic product. "When we started *Scena9*, we first asked [for the opinions of] the people whose cultural projects we sponsored and consulted with them on who may run it. They came up with names of people who understood this new culture [that] we were interested in. Paradoxically, they were not journalists," Frîncu said.³⁰

Initially, they built a website that was presented as a platform for new voices. "It worked but it was not what we had in mind. We needed pace and consistency in publishing. It [this initial experience] was an eye opener [...]. We understood that we needed journalists, we needed a structure," Frîncu said.



Vasiliu, who at the time was a journalist with *Dilema Veche*, one of the most reputed cultural weeklies in Romania, was recommended to BRD by people the bank trusted, and she agreed to lead the *Scena9* project.

Școala9 was published for a while by *Decât o Revistă* (DoR), a well-established, independent newsroom focused on narrative journalism. DoR's journalists were writing stories for *Școala9* in parallel with their regular reporting for DoR. When the workload became too strenuous, *Școala9* was spun off.

What facilitated the cooperation between BRD and the editorial teams leading its publications was everyone's adherence to the same set of values. Values did not need to be negotiated, the three publications' chief editors, Tăușance, Archip, and Vasiliu, agreed in inter-

views conducted separately. "There was no need for formal, contractual negotiations on this, as we were from the same cloud of values," Tăușance said.³¹ Representatives from BRD meet with *Scena9*'s, *Școala9*'s, and *MCS*'s editorial teams once or twice a year, but only to inform them about the bank's priorities and activities. No guidelines or instructions are imposed on the journalists. "They communicate their priorities, we communicate ours, wherever they coincide it's good. But if they don't, that's not a problem," Archip said.³²

Editorial independence is the first issue that comes to mind when one hears about a bank funding publications. There are clauses guaranteeing their independence in the management contracts of all three publications and these clauses have always been respected, according to the three editorial heads. "It is unequivocal," said Archip. They neither publish content written by the bank's public relations department nor advertise the bank's products. "We fought for this," Vasiliu said.³³ "We don't even write about the bank's other CSR projects in our respective fields, unless they are congruent with our editorial interest," Tăușance added.³⁴

During their annual meetings, the bank's brand management team and editorial teams discuss and agree on themes, the expected output volume, and the types of voices that should be promoted and that need a platform to make themselves heard. As a rule, the publications do not cover political and religious topics from an ideological point of view. "We are not interested in debates among politicians or parties," Frîncu said. They are, however, well aware of the effects of politics on their work, as Frîncu noted, "everything is politics: culture, education, digitalization."³⁵

Editorial independence is ensured not only by preventing any forms of control over the content production process by the funder, but also by protecting the publications from outside pressures. There have been cases when people called the bank and asked it to discipline the journalists working for its publications or to take down various articles. "Always, and I say always, BRD had our backs. They asked for our version of the facts and never pressured us to do anything against our best editorial judgment. They were not scared; they did not cave in," Vasiliu said.³⁶

Frîncu says that before pitching the three projects to bank senior leadership, the BRD's communications team, which is in charge of the projects, had to familiarize themselves with the country's media landscape and gain credibility in their interactions with the bank's management.

BRD offers the three publications financial support, granted via annual contracts. The contracts also set medium-term performance milestones, such as audience figures and the desired profile of readers that the publications should aim for. According to Archip, these aimed-for audience numbers are just indicative, not compulsory. "It is very important to not have the pressure of [achieving] high traffic. Our only pressure is to remain relevant," Archip said.³⁷

Scena9, the oldest and better established of the three publications, has an audience of over one million unique users a year. *Şcoala9* and *MCS* attract up to 400,000 unique users annually.

All publications also have development plans that entail attracting additional funds. The publications have the liberty to determine their own strategies to reach these goals. But fundraising has turned out not to be an easy task. "We have our own internal policy when it comes to advertising. Of course, we shall not accept money from any other banks or lending institutions. No gambling, no tobacco, no spirits, no fake science, no big polluters," Tăuşance said.³⁸ In addition to these rules, *Scena9* also follows a set of "ethical criteria" in accepting advertisers. For example, it does not accept money from companies involved in corruption cases.

None of the three publications has thus far managed to generate funding from sources other than BRD. One reason for this is the lack of expertise and experience in fundraising among the staff. To fix that, *Scena9* plans to hire a fundraising specialist. Vasiliu, its chief editor, believes that attracting financial contributions from third parties would be an indicator of success. "It would mean that our content is so good that others are willing to be associated with it," she said.³⁹ Tăuşance is less optimistic about the prospect of sustainability. "Niche journalism like ours cannot exist without support. You are either part of a [corporate] holding or you find somebody to fund you for

three years or more so that you can achieve some sustainability," he said.⁴⁰

BRD has its own plans for sustainability, and is working to develop a business model for the three publications. BRD is likely to maintain its actual level of financial support, roughly €500,000 (\$486,000) a year, but would want any further expansion of the publications to be funded by third parties. The bank rules out crowdfunding and direct support from readers. Instead, it wants the publications to attract advertising revenues and financial support from other businesses alongside occasional grants from institutional donors like the European Union. "We are happy with the editorial formula. But our publications need to grow financially too. It is for their own health," Frîncu said. According to her, a business model for the publications is expected within two to three years.⁴¹

But sustainability is more than a financial issue. "It's all about people," Vasiliu said. BRD's communications team has been very supportive and stood by the project even when the parent company in France expressed doubts. This personal investment in the project, which was considered rather exotic for a bank, has been as important as the institutional one. "They fought for us. For as long as these people will stay with BRD, the project is safe," Vasiliu said.⁴²

Frîncu stresses that the approval of the project was "a unique window of opportunity." Such opportunities are rarer today, given the crises that have been gripping the world in recent years. "Times are different now. We would most probably not start new [publications] from scratch," Frîncu said.⁴³

The project pitch was also successful because the BRD team knew how bankers thought. "We are a bank and, by definition, we are a risk-avoiding institution. But when assessing risks, we think long term. We give people loans for 30 years, after all," Frîncu said. "No short-termers here. They think long term and are not afraid," Frîncu added.⁴⁴

Initially, BRD hoped that its model of engaging with independent media would inspire other businesses to either add their support to the three publications or start their own projects on themes that are relevant for them. That hasn't happened yet.

Fighting the System from Within: A Media Expert Seeks Solutions for Allocating Advertising Revenue on Ethical Grounds

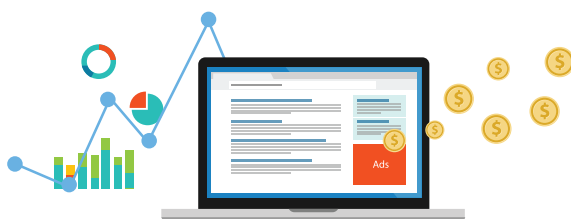
Dragoş Stanca is a seasoned media analyst. He has worked in both journalism and advertising, and thus understands the issue of a badly designed system of advertising distribution from both sides. He thinks that the problem is big and complicated, sucking the marrow out of the very media system.

According to Stanca, the distribution of ad revenues in the Romanian market is a model that works against quality journalism. Some 90 percent of the €600 to €800 million (\$587 million to \$782 million) in annual ad spending in Romania is allocated based on quantitative criteria. Most of it goes to the big tech platforms (Google and Facebook), which, through their algorithms of programmatic advertising, monetize traffic to the detriment of editorial quality. Thus, influencers—be they vloggers, singers, dancers, or TV stars—get more ad revenue than a Romanian investigative journalism project such as *Recorder* whose journalists risk their lives to expose corruption and theft.

Stanca's solution: "Ethical advertising. Or something." For the last couple of years, he has looked for ways to channel part of the advertising money toward supporting relevant journalistic content. "It is difficult, we are fighting against human nature,"



Stanca said, arguing that people will always be more interested in sensationalistic, easy-to-grasp content and will yield to their confirmation bias rather than look for serious, critical content.⁴⁵ This consumption pattern is self-replicating: the more people watch low-quality content, the more ad money is funneled toward it and the more incentivized creators are to produce that kind of content. Because of the automatic distribution of ads via integrated systems such as Google Display Network, advertisers do not have control over the content in the publications their ads appear in. "I talked to people in the business sector here, smart and competent people, and they had no idea how the advertising market functions. They had no idea that they are actually funding the very kind of content they, as media consumers, complain about," Stanca said. "Mis/disinformation is mainly about money, not exclusively about agenda or hostile intervention," he added.

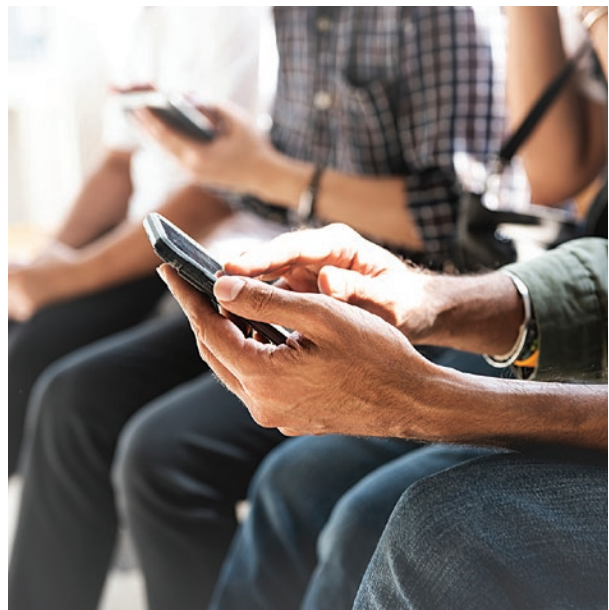


Stanca's suggestion is to look for ways to voluntarily divert a small percentage, say 2 to 3 percent, of general advertising budgets to "social content that serves the greater good." Even if the fund created through these revenues remains small, it will make a world of difference for those who receive these additional funds. "What I am doing is sort of pioneering values, I have to invent words for this," Stanca said. His idea has thus far been well received, which encouraged him to further develop it. But, to move it forward, he thinks that people in charge of advertising budgets need "partners who understand their business needs and provide them with solid arguments to engage in [such an] endeavor."

Stanca does not yet know how exactly this can be done. What he knows for sure is that there are companies that will join such an "ethical advertising network" and publicize it as such, maybe with a mark or a logo on the products it supports. It also needs an intermediary organization to manage it and independent advisors to help ground the decisions on how the money should be distributed. Probably the thorniest issue, if such a system were created, would be how to evaluate editorial quality—how to create credible and solid qualitative criteria to replace the currently used quantitative ones. "Tools, technology and metrics, this is what it takes for it to work," Stanca said. These elements are needed to persuade private businesses to join and keep them engaged.

Another tactic to promote the system could be publicly exposing companies that refuse to join. "A bit of public shaming, if it comes to it," Stanca said. He even advanced a more drastic solution of imposing taxes on advertising. "[It would work] like with the tobacco products. We, societies, decided that tobacco is bad for people's health, but people still smoke. So, we introduced excise taxes to increase the 'sin tax.' What if we do the same for advertising?"

Before any such mechanisms are created, media education initiatives, especially targeted to people in the business sector who decide on advertising money, should be designed. Private businesses must get a clearer picture of how the media market is moving and take responsibility for their role in promoting critical thinking. "CSR is not a strong enough instrument.



Especially when it's seen, as it frequently happens, as another form of advertising. One can support a project here and there, and it's good they do, but we are facing a systemic problem and should come up with a systemic solution," Stanca said.

This ethical advertising model goes against the grain, as "it would hurt the very business model of both media and goods and services providers. [...] It's all about sustainability. If we don't address the flaw in the system, it will replicate itself indefinitely," Stanca concluded.⁴⁶

The Rebels: Young Independent Journalists Don't Need and Don't Want Money from Private Businesses

The Journalist's House (Casa Jurnalistului, CJ) is a one-of-a-kind journalistic project—so different that it does not even exist on paper. It is not officially registered as an NGO, company, or anything else. It started in 2011 as a collective of independent journalists who could not practice the kind of high-quality independent journalism they desired within corporate newsrooms. Based in Bucharest, they practice “journalism as a way of life.”⁴⁷

They do have a house where reporters in the project can live or just come to work and where they organize events for their readers.⁴⁸ In 2016, they started a residence program, inviting young reporters to join them. Three people currently live in the house, with all costs covered; 10 journalists use the house's resources to keep blogs active; and another 20 have published on CJ's platform.

CJ journalists have collaborated with major international media outlets such as *The Guardian*, Al Jazeera, Channel 4, and *USA Today*, but they also have produced a wealth of original output.

Their focus is on in-depth feature stories about social issues in Eastern Europe and beyond. They are funded exclusively through private, individual donations and receive some small in-kind support from friendly catering companies that provide them with food every now and then.

The CJ's founder is Vlad Ursulean. Ursulean previously worked with reputed mainstream media newspapers and started CJ initially as a way to help fellow journalists cope with the economic crisis. As they were going months in a row without their sal-



aries paid, many journalists could not afford to pay rent. Ursulean thought of a way to accommodate his fellows and found a house for all of them to share.

“In the beginning, we accepted funding from companies or worked on NGO-funded projects. We worked with the best. And it still turned bad,” Ursulean said.⁴⁹ Eventually, CJ “bumped into the limits of the funding model,” Ursulean said, when corporate funders tried to make demands on their content. As a result, they decided to no longer accept corporate funds.

CJ emerged as a daring content provider in early 2012 at a time of social unrest generated by the then planned reform of the healthcare system that would have given a significant market share to private operators. In January 2012, protesters took to the streets and violent clashes were recorded in Bucharest, Romania's capital city. Ursulean's reporting of the events was the most-read article that day, representing half of the total readership attracted by mainstream newspapers.⁵⁰

CJ's style of honest and immersive reporting, as well as the outlet's courageous attitude, appealed to many, including some would-be sponsors. “The

companies want to be associated with a certain way of life, a certain way of doing journalism. This association is limiting both ways,” Ursulean said.⁵¹ In his opinion, companies want you to deliver the same kind of journalism that they appreciated in the first place—same topics, same formats, same writing style. This limits the options of funded media outlets regarding the types of content they can offer their audiences. At the same time, to secure cash flow, journalists, purposefully or not, keep reproducing the same type of journalism that satisfied the company. In the long run, this results in stagnation, missed opportunities, and dissatisfaction.

“We have changed the kind of journalism we do four times since our inception. No sponsor would have agreed with this,” Ursulean said. The same goes for NGO project-based reporting. “Social topics are surely needed and legitimate. But when you get out in the field, you may come across other topics, other angles that would divert you from the initial topic. The journalistic [instinct] is to follow them. The project [logic] is to ignore them and stick to the plan, and this is frustrating,” Ursulean said.

Sooner or later, he thinks, sponsoring companies, constrained by their CSR programs or connections with other business partners, will try to interfere in the editorial output of the media they support, asking for articles to be “nicer” or to be erased from the internet when they are inconvenient. It happened to CJ in 2013, when a conflict with their sponsor, an unnamed brewer that was covering the rent and utilities of the house where the journalists were living, became public. The sponsor considered an article published by a CJ reporter to be inappropriate and insensitive (it was about an autopsy and the language was rather explicit), asking the journalists to take it down. CJ accused its sponsor of censorship, and the sponsor accused CJ of not understanding what contractual terms meant. It was then that CJ decided to fully embrace crowdfunding as the sole source of funding and sever all ties with corporate funding for good.

Crowdfunding in Romania is in its infancy, and, as everywhere in the world, people are rather reluctant to pay for journalistic products that they used to get for free. Still, CJ receives sufficient money from



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individual donors to keep the residence and cover the costs of three resident journalists. Ursulean said that the funding that CJ now attracts is sufficient for CJ's purposes. A larger cash flow would be “a vulnerability” to a journalism project as it creates administrative issues that journalists are not equipped or willing to deal with. Ursulean also believes that the money coming from readers is the most “honest” form of funding for a journalism project as it keeps the group on its toes.

“We, at CJ, don't aim at large audiences. What we want is a media educated community that understands and supports us,” Ursulean added. He believes that journalists are “better equipped than ever, technologically speaking, to do crowdfunding.” In his opinion, businesses willing to support independent journalism should invest in media education, especially focused on teachers. “It is almost like a nation-building project,” he said. People have to be educated to appreciate journalism and its value, to discern between good and bad journalism, and also learn about its true costs, as well as their role in contributing to the proliferation of good reporting. The business sector can also help by donating equipment—“a camera is a camera,” as Ursulean put it—without any particular expectations.⁵²

Recommendations

Interactions among businesses and media are varied, taking different forms, progressing at different paces and producing different results. But there are common features that emerge from the four case studies analyzed in this paper. In each project, it appears that, regardless of how different the inception, plans, or actors are, the same types of problems have emerged. There are lessons that both media and businesses may learn from them. Below are recommendations to both media and journalists who want to access funding from companies and businesses interested in supporting journalism-related projects.

Journalists and businesses should learn more about each other, especially about how they can help each other

Businesspeople should learn more about the media ecosystem they work in, not simply as media consumers but as participants in the ecosystem. Hence, they should get more information about media players and their rules, limitations, legal restraints, and financial situations.

Journalists in turn should learn how a business is run and, especially those working on independent projects, should get familiar with managerial skills.

The two groups should learn to respect each other and understand their own freedoms and constraints, including how they can help each other in this process.

Businesses should support fringe narratives that commercial media do not tackle

As in every media market, mainstream media cover dominating narratives with wide public visibility,



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whereas more fringe topics that the big media outlets do not tackle—because they're viewed as too marginal, controversial, disturbing for the public, difficult to address, and costly—are left uncovered. Private businesses should support projects covering these issues.

Private businesses should create or identify an intermediary structure to channel financial support to media

Private businesses willing to support independent media should create or engage an intermediary entity, i.e., a foundation or NGO, to secure the smooth running of the project as journalists prefer not to work directly with their sponsors because that would spoil their credibility and arguably affect their independence.

Companies willing to support media initiatives should plan for the long term

As journalistic projects take a long time to mature and achieve financial sustainability, private companies should consider supporting independent media initiatives for the medium to long term to achieve impact. Their efforts should allow space for trial and error to ensure the project learns from its own mistakes.

Companies should experiment with new forms of funding models for media, including technology-based solutions

At a time of fast changes in the business models for media and journalism, companies interested in supporting media projects should also consider less conventional, technology-based solutions. These can include creating a nationwide private fund for media freedom, advertising distribution systems driven by ethical criteria, or crypto-currency-anchored funding models. In the process, they should include journalists and other people working for media companies as well as IT specialists and technology developers.

Methodology

This report distills the findings of research conducted from March to April 2022. The research consisted of desk research, document review, and seven interviews. Interviews conducted for this report include the following:

- **Mihai Matei**, CEO ESSENSYS Software, interviewed by author on May 5, 2022 and on May 7, 2022
- **Vlad Tăușance**, publisher of *MCS*, interviewed by author on April 5, 2022
- **Andreea Archip**, editor-in-chief of *Școala9*, interviewed by author on April 20, 2022
- **Luiza Vasiliu**, editor-in-chief of *Scena9*, interviewed by author on April 28, 2022
- **Cosmina Frîncu**, brand communication manager at BRD Groupe Societe Generale, interviewed by author on May 5, 2022
- **Dragoș Stanca**, managing partner of Think Digital Group of companies in Romania, president of the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau, interviewed by author on April 21, 2022
- **Vlad Ursulean**, founder of Journalist's House, interviewed by author on April 29, 2022



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Endnotes

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- ¹³ Matei reran the original post from 2018 on May 8, 2022, for Mother's Day, as a warning following an article in Politico revealing that the US Supreme Court was about to change its pro-choice position. Matei's 2022 post is available on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/mihaimateig/posts/pfbid05Ncd-6sPeWoCTh85u76S222mPMuAu5jPYDm7raRMtcE8KMDSFvYy-wSZmZf3TziFK4I>, accessed May 8, 2022.
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- ²⁷ Reziștența Scena9 is a cultural hotspot housed in a building listed as a historical monument that is located at 32 I.L. Caragiale Street in Bucharest. The building was erected in 1890 and belonged to the royal family until 1947 when it was confiscated by Communists.
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