

Watchdog activities hamper the government to exert influence on media through open and brutal methods. Therefore, the ways of achieving this goal are becoming increasingly diverse.

One of the directions of activities carried out by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) involves the monitoring on using soft censorship by the state to promote positive media coverage.

“Soft censorship” or “indirect state censorship” is an effective means of media manipulation and control around the world not through direct and violent methods, but by means of indirect pressure.

Soft censorship is used to promote positive coverage of and to punish media outlets that criticize officials or their actions. It is the practice of influencing news coverage of state bodies and officials and their policies and activities through allocation or withholding of state media spending (subsidies, advertising, and other media contracts or assistance), or selective application of licensing, permits or regulations, to shape the broad media landscape; promote or diminish the economic viability of specific media houses or outlets; and/or reward or punish content produced by individual media workers.

There are five categories of soft censorship:

- State advertising
- Subsidies
- Paid news
- Bribery and payments
- Other administrative pressures

State advertising: use of public funds to announce public tenders and procurement, or for information campaigns to promote government policies, programs or service in media outlets. Abuse of state advertising would include advertising that promotes a particular office holder or political party, or when its placement is used to influence media editorial content.

Subsidies: assistance to a specific media house or media outlet, or to a media sector, provided by the state or a publicly funded body. A “hidden subsidy” is indirect financial assistance to selected media from public funds that is not officially defined and registered as a subsidy. Sometimes the state has adopted transparent and fair rules on state subsidies or advertising, but implementation is poor.

Paid “News”: paid content disguised as news, where financial arrangements are formalized with media outlets to promote a biased coverage of certain issues.

Bribery and payments: journalists, editors and media outlets are offered and sometimes seek direct payments or other compensation to shape or slant their reporting.

Other administrative pressures: are found when licenses, imports, audits or taxes are used as instruments of soft censorship, although the boundaries between these and hard censorship can be indistinct or overlapping. Onerous licensing regimes, restricting access to physical means of production, such as barring import of newsprint, or inspections and tax audits might be used as harassment that imposes serious costs and inconvenience on targeted media outlets or individuals, or means to shutter independent or critical voices.

Soft censorship has a painful impact on media. Exerting pressure on news coverage through biased, non-transparent allocation of funds and other financial tools may cause self-censorship that will restrict information dissemination and media will seem free only at a glance.

The tactics of official soft censorship are increasingly pervasive and alarmingly effective means of media manipulation and control around the world. Techniques of soft censorship are far less visible and dramatic than blatant media repression that draws immediate and intense attention from press freedom and other human rights groups. Yet soft censorship can prove highly insidious for its relative subtlety; a public that is denied accurate and impartial information is unlikely to be aware and properly wary of its existence and its impact.

Therefore, it is extremely important to interest those organizations, which are capable and have a relevant qualification to research and reveal such impact. It is important to study the impact of soft censorship and try to challenge it.

When talking about soft censorship, online media becomes increasingly topical, as the role of online media in modern technologically developed society is further increasing. Media structure in most countries is completely changing through expansion of online media. For example, in Macedonia, expansion of the Internet and social media has led to the emergence of a lot of online portals, which are new for the country's legal reality and do not fall under the new media law.

Online media functioning is related to fewer financial and administrative difficulties compared to TV and radio broadcasting that is accompanied by a number of positive and negative effects. According to WAN-IFRA report on soft censorship in Macedonia², some online portals are run by journalists who previously worked for now closed media outlets, but others are created anonymously as pro-government mouthpieces. Some online portals and social networks are reporting on topics that are ignored or suppressed in other media outlets. Every day there are dozens of new stories via Facebook, Twitter, a blog or news portal, but the provenance and credibility of these reports is often uncertain.

It is universally established practice to use the services of online news agencies by the state and it is important to monitor whether or not the government uses this service to promote partisan or personal interests instead of the state interests.

The research on soft censorship was carried out in a number of countries and reports were prepared examining various forms of soft censorship and harmful practices existing in this direction (see Annex 1).

² http://www.wan-ifra.org/sites/default/files/field_article_file/Soft%20Censorship%20Macedonia%20Dec%2015.pdf