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Press freedom in Western Europe through the eyes of investigative journalists

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ACRONYMS:

CMPF	The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom
COE	Council of Europe
EFJ	European Federation of Journalists
FOI	Freedom of Information
ICIJ	International Consortium of Investigative Journalists
IGO	Inter-Governmental Organization
MMF	Mapping Media Freedom
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PGP	Pretty Good Privacy
RSF/RWB	Reporters Sans Frontières/Reporters Without Borders
VRM	Vlaamse Regulator voor Media (Flemish Media regulator)

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to grasp the extent of press freedom in Western Europe perceived in the eyes of Belgian investigative journalists and experts, by delineating both in which ways it's at strength and in which ways it's restricted. By meeting results from objective documents with subjective views of investigative journalists and experts through 19 in-depth interviews, findings, obtained from micro to macro level, suggest that though the overall press freedom knows its valuable protection, there are some alarming restrictions, both within the media organization as outside of it and often to do with monetary aspects. Such restrictions may be impacting the content outcome of which needs to be looked at more closely in order to guarantee freedom for journalists and thus a well-informed audience in democracy.

Keywords	Press freedom, media organizations, transparency, safety, (self-)censorship, threat, pluralism, independence, law, investigative journalism, information, quality
Number of words	23.698 words

1. Introduction

1.1. AIM OF THE MASTER THESIS

The aim of this master thesis is to bring to light the extent of press freedom that is at stake according to investigative journalists and experts in Western Europe. Within this research the combination of the objective reports and the subjective views of the journalists and experts will thus be brought together to be able to grasp restrictions and strengths of press freedom in this part of Europe. To bring structure in this research, all findings will be divided amongst the level of influence, being from micro level to macro level, of which will be further outlined in the theoretical framework below.

1.2. MAIN ISSUES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Press freedom is a much talked about phenomenon worldwide. Countries such as Syria, Iraq and Turkey receive volumes of attention regarding the everlasting poor state of press freedom that has been visible. Ongoing executions of journalists take place for the mere fact of expressing themselves and assessing elements in a critical matter. Abusive institutions of power make that many voices are forced to be silenced (Voorhoof, 2015). Extreme cases as such generally aren't found in Western Europe. Moreover, research shows that Europe generally belongs to the most press free continents globally (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009; Future Media Lab, 2016; RSF, 2016). Though this varies throughout European countries, each experiencing their own specific difficulties, one can still state that *overall*, especially in Western Europe there appears to be a satisfactory situation regarding press freedom. This specifically in contrast to countries located in other continents (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009; RSF, 2016).

However, despite this positive outlook, several cases point towards a less press free environment in practice than one may initially think, whether in a rather subtle matter or not (Voorhoof, 2014). These threats can be caused by a variety of factors, such as economic, historic, cultural, social or religious

power (Czepek, Hellwig and Nowak, 2009). Restrictions caused by such factors appear to not be new in Western Europe, as argued by journalists themselves on news website *'Mo'* (Pauwels & Dujardin, 2015), though, it hasn't been brought to light frequently. This thus also counts for Belgium, being located at the heart of Europe. Organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the known Index on Censorship keep track of happenings that violate press freedom to create awareness on a global basis (Voorhoof, 2014). By law freedom of press seems to be well protected. Nonetheless, in practice it is not as untouchable as may be assumed (Voorhoof, 2015). Various forms of censorship appear to take place in journalistic processes despite this being forbidden in the Belgian constitution, even forming a crisis in journalism according to Voorhoof (2014).

As Czepek, Hellwig and Nowak (2009) point out, press freedom is often taken for granted in Europe without offering enough attention to it. However, the notion of press freedom should not be ignored in any shape of form (UNESCO, 2007). Media censorship can hereby have problematic effects on society, such as a lack of (truthful) information, even possibly leading to a less educated society (World Wide Women, 2014) or a lack of trust in the press (CD Verkenningen, 2005). Press freedom is a crucial aspect in a democracy and subsequently forms a 'fundamental human right'. Thus, it has to be looked at closely in order to be guaranteed and protected in a proper way (UNESCO, 2007). Seeing as research points out censorship does indeed take place in Western Europe (Voorhoof, 2014), it thus becomes extremely important for society that the forms of influence, whether in a very subtle form or not, are being brought to light. Investigative journalists, who may often be confronted with such issues, could thus offer insight on the current state of this phenomenon, as stated above.

Academically, there are several documents available that state that there are indeed restrictions to press freedom in Western Europe and censorship does take place amongst journalists (Czepek, Hellwig and Nowak, 2009; Voorhoof, 2014; Voorhoof, 2015). Numerous cases are brought to light in articles in

which such restrictions are covered. However, these scientific sources often aren't based on the subjective views and experiences of investigative journalists themselves. Generally, investigative journalists are most confronted with restrictions of press freedom compared to other journalists. In this sense, investigative journalists are more focused on in-depth and critical reporting by unveiling matters in society, either by positions of power or accidentally behind a chaotic structure, as pointed out by IGO's such as UNESCO (2016). They hereby often experience more criticism and interference from governments and organizations and they face various consequences of litigations (Voorhoof, 2014). This means that they often may skip certain topics out of fear for allegations or use elements of preventative censorship (Labunski & Pavlik, 1985). On top of that, investigative journalists can truly contribute to the notion of press freedom, which thus is extremely important for democracy (UNESCO, 2016). Their view on such matters can thus be extremely relevant and interesting in understanding censorship and the notion of press freedom in Western Europe.

Hereby, this research is based on unraveling investigative journalists' and experts views on press freedom and factors that influence the notion. Their views can thus help define what the restrictions and strengths of this matter are, and to *what extent* restrictions are present. Journalists nowadays face many tensions, often deriving from digitalization and the search for new working business models (Deuze, 2001). Furthermore, it is exactly mostly critical journalism that is under threat in this geographical region (Voorhoof, 2014). They hereby have to face the difficulty of living up to the expectancy of what professional journalism is or has to be nowadays (Deuze, 2001). The effectiveness of media, in this sense, provides access to information and freedom of expression, as pointed out by the OECD (2013). Seeing investigate journalists' ties with issues of press freedom and their ability to influence this notion (UNESCO, 2016), their views become extremely relevant in unraveling such elements. Special attention will be made for the Belgian case, due to its strategic location in Europe. However, nonetheless elements of Western Europe and Europe as a whole will be included throughout the research due to its interdependence regarding the notion.

This brings us to the following main research question:

- **To what extent do Belgian investigate journalists perceive the media as 'free'?**

In assistance of answering the main question, the following sub-questions are identified:

  - In which ways is press freedom in Western Europe at strength according to investigative journalists?
  - In which ways is press freedom in Western Europe restricted according to investigative journalists?

This will be approached in a qualitative manner in order to fully grasp investigative journalists' detailed views on it in a descriptive way. In-depth interviews will be done with investigative journalists to reveal their possibly sensitive personal views, observations and experiences of which the qualitative in-depth approach is known for (Mortelmans, 2013).

In order to formulate a concrete answer to these questions, specific levels of restrictions will be scrutinized. These restrictions can, as stated above, take place in a very subtle matter, going from micro level to macro level. Each level will hereby be discussed to fully grasp the ways and the extent of press freedom that is experienced by investigative journalists. As a theoretical framework to structure findings of restrictions, the *hierarchy of influences* developed by Reese (2007) will be used.

The first part of the thesis, being the literature overview, will on one hand cover a theoretical overview and critical situating of concepts, followed up by current findings of press freedom restrictions in Western Europe on each level of influence. Findings from this overview will be used for the second part of the thesis, namely the empirical overview, whereby concrete methodological findings of the data gathering will be outlined.

2. Literature overview

Introduction literature overview

The aim in the literature overview will be to structure concrete findings of possible restrictions on each level of influence. This, to be able to facilitate the interviewing process, by meeting the objective findings with the subjective views of investigative journalists. In order to grasp a full understanding of the matter prior to formulating such findings, in first instance the theoretical framework will be specified, followed up by a concrete overview of conceptual definitions. Findings will be formulated from micro to macro level, starting off with findings on the individual level of the journalists, followed up by findings through routines, organizational finings, institutional findings and lastly ideological findings. Each of these levels will be further explained within each section.

2.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To clearly outline the approach of this research the notion of press freedom needs to be scrutinized on the basis of scientific literature. In order to provide a clear answer to the open research question, not one, but a hand full of factors that play a role in restricting press freedom in Western Europe will be kept into consideration. Concepts that help operationalize this notion include, according to Reporters Without Borders and UNESCO, pluralism, transparency, independence, safety and (self-)censorship and legislative freedom (RSF, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). Thus, before one can talk about the extent of press freedom, what is understood under such terms in this research must be delimited. Also, the link between these concepts will be outlined. In order to identify findings on the various levels of influence and to grasp the extent of press freedom that is present in Western Europe, the link between press freedom and these criteria, as well as the difference between these criteria will be outlined. As research by Gallego (2014) shows, for example, it can be very difficult to identify concrete differences between self-censorship and censorship. Thus, this research will be used as a reference to place these concepts in context. Platforms such as Unesco (2016) form interesting

reference points to do so. This will be further outlined in the following section of the literature overview.

In order to formulate a concrete answer to 'the extent that Belgian investigative journalists perceive the media as free' (=main question) and in which ways they see restriction in Western European press freedom, a clear overview of current findings on each level of influence needs to outlined. Throughout this thesis *the hierarchy of influences* model developed by Reese (2007) will be used as a theoretical framework. This model helps scrutinize specific levels of influence on media content, which can, as stated above, take place in a very subtle or very noticeable matter, going from micro level to macro level. Each level will hereby be discussed to fully grasp the ways and the extent of press freedom that is experienced by investigative journalists.

Reese (2007, p. 35) thus identifies 5 levels of influence, from micro to macro level, being:

1. **Individual**: this refers to any psychological element that may cause bias.
2. **Routines**: Journalists need to stick to a set of routines in order to be professional ('getting the work done').
3. **Organizational**: This is based on satisfying the organization's needs. The organization has a set of rules, of which journalists should strive to fulfill.
4. **Extramedia** (institutional): Professionalism generally is different according to the institutional relationship the medium is in.
5. **Ideological** (Socio-cultural): The *"professional values must be consistent with the prevailing power structure"* (Reese, 2007, p. 36).

Each level will hereby be further outlined by section in the literature overview. According to Reese (2007, p. 38), *"a levels-of-analysis approach reminds us that the different routines may serve similar functions when compared across culture."* Within this research, the case of Western Europe will be examined, with an extra eye for the Belgian case. This can hereby help structure the

notion amongst several countries. Moreover, research by Statham (2008) points out that journalists in Europe appear to have many common practices and experiences.

More information about the background of these levels are found in former research by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), which thus will also be closely looked at within this thesis. These two scientific approaches hereby become the theoretical skeleton of this thesis.

Lastly, academic literature gathered in this thesis will be interdisciplinary. The notion of press freedom has been examined within several disciplines, being partly in law, psychology, communication studies and journalism studies.

2.2. CONCEPTUALIZATION

Press freedom, though the popularity in its use, is an extremely broad notion of which many standpoints are available. Generally, it is defined as *"the right to publish newspapers, magazines, and other printed matter without governmental restriction and subject only to the laws of libel, obscenity, sedition, etc."* (Dictionary.com, p.1) or *"The right to circulate opinions in print without censorship by the government."* (Dictionary.com, p. 1). However, the point of view could differ according to the strategic geographic region one is talking about. Hereby, ideology tends to play a specific role when defining the notion of 'freedom' alone. Countries where religion values tend to take toll in politics thus may have a different view as to what freedom should be in comparison to countries where this is not the case. Also historical aspects of a country play a role in the ways in which freedom is defined. Moreover, press freedom thus *has* and could have different meanings over time (Nordenstreng, 2007). According to Nordenstreng (2007) freedom as an ideological instrument should be strictly avoided by stimulating debate about the idea. Thus, sticking a specific definition to the notion with full objectivity is not easy and keeping a critical eye is needed.

To facilitate the process of understanding press freedom, it could be a good deal to look at those factors that influence and operationalize press freedom. NGO's and IGO'S that keep track of the levels of press freedom each have their own ways in measuring the notion. According to Reporters Without Borders, or in French 'Reporters Sans Frontières' (RSF), indicators to measure press freedom include pluralism, media independence, the media environment and (self-)censorship, the legislative framework, transparency, the infrastructure, and abuses (RSF, 2016). UNESCO also identifies pluralism and independence as important elements in reporting about press freedom, but adds freedom and safety to the list. Such indicators could cause restrictions on different levels of influence. Furthermore, these elements are interrelated, and if one of each is affected, it could often also affect the other (UNESCO, 2014). Concretely, by combining and summarizing such views on press freedom, it will be kept into consideration in this research as follows:

- **Pluralism**: This refers to *"the degree to which opinions are represented in the media"* (RSF, 2016, p. 1) as well as false representations or implications of elements that could be from social, political and cultural grounds (UNESCO, 2014).

- **Transparency**: With transparency, RSF (2016) looks at the accessibility of those institutions that may have an impact on news production.

- **Independence**: Hereby is meant that the media should function without interference of *"political, governmental, business and religious power and influence"* (RSF, 2016, p. 1), and thus provide quality journalism. Usually this is backed up by organizations that stand for autonomous journalism (UNESCO, 2014).

- **Safety and (self-)censorship**: This refers to ways in which the organization or an individual in the organization operates (RSF, 2016), which could be impacted by elements outside of it. Specific threats to journalists could mean that (self-)censorship takes place (UNESCO, 2014). Hereby the distinction between self-censorship and censorship becomes clear.

- **Freedom: Legislation and infrastructure:** These elements point towards the legal framework of press freedom, how this is used in practice and the extent to which such laws are protected (UNESCO, 2014), as well as the quality of the infrastructure standing behind the production of news content (RSF, 2016), which also impacts the freedom that could be experienced by journalists.

However, Seeing the openness of the research question, this may expand in this research according to investigative journalists' view. The main research question is strictly specified on framing their view on the notion, which means these may not be the same as found in objective documents, which thus, could broaden the understanding of the extent of press freedom felt in Western Europe.

Within this research press freedom will be taken in a broad sense, on each level of interference, whether in a very visible or rather subtle way. Thus this research leaves with the thought that press freedom could be restricted in complex ways, deriving from the journalists themselves (micro), to the ideologies that are present in a society (macro). However, to structure this, the above concepts will be included and used as a reference to be able to study press freedom throughout the literature study, in order to report on findings within each level of influence. Throughout the data gathering process the notion may be broadened, since new concepts can be retrieved and some can be seen as less important, in order to fully frame investigative journalists' views on press freedom.

2.3. FINDINGS ON INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Preface

With this micro level of influence, Reese (2007) refers to the media worker himself and the psychological factors that may play a role in the content outcome. This could revolve around any personal situation that may take place, it could derive more from a professional ground, referring more to organizational constraints or it could have a political background, meaning ideological constraints may take place. Concretely, this impact on media content could be caused by concrete fear, which leads to self-censorship (Yesil, 2014), or could be caused by bias, referring more to the identity of the individual (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Important hereby is that intrinsic influence on media content can be both conscious and subconscious (O'Leary & Lázaro, 2011).

Thus, (outside) elements that become part of the individual or affect the individual can impact the ways in which content is reported, which could lead to bias or self-censorship. Depending how strong this bias or self-censorship is, it could lead to greater structural issues of pluralism, not offering correct or balanced information, in which the needed opinions are included to the public (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2011). Thus, individual bias and self-censorship could have an impact on press freedom (Gehlbach, 2016). Moreover, as we have seen above, such issues form a direct measure to press freedom for organizations such as UNESCO and RSF (RSF, 2016; UNESCO, 2014). Such, often subtle elements also have shown to be present in Western Europe, which we be outlined in this section.

2.3.1. Self-censorship in Western European press

There has been confusion on what the true difference between censorship and self-censorship is (Gallego, 2014). Yesil (2014, p. 72) defines it as follows: *"In censorship, boundaries are drawn about what to write or not by the outside powers, such as governments and companies, so journalists or publisher have no choice but write or publish as they are directed. On the*

contrary, in self –censoring issue, journalists are not told to do things openly but they censor themselves, hide some facts that they think would be dangerous to write." Thus, self-censorship occurs on the level of the media individual himself, without being told to do so, grounded by personal motivations (Yesil, 2014).

Generally, not much empirical study on (self-)censorship in Western Europe has been proceeded thus far. The roots of this issue may be due to the difficulty of measuring it in the first place (Humphreys, 1996). However, organizations such as the Index of Censorship have known to measure and outline the issue. Hereby, it has been argued to take place in Western Europe, despite its preventative status in the legislation (Voorhoof, 2014). The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) (2016) confirms this by stating that it tends to take place even in an increasing matter. Thus, scholars have known to indicate certain findings (Yesil, 2014). Its close ties with pluralism, whereby high pluralism often goes together with low self-censorship, have eased the process towards new findings (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2011). Hereby, EFJ (2016) states that self-censorship appears to take place in different ways within this part of Europe internally. According to Pradalié in France most of these issues derive from surveillance, whereby she blames the level of law. Grebenhof states that the self-censorship in Germany is not direct, but is however affected by the media company's budgeting and hiring choices, which would lead to a lack of quality reporting, and thus more self-censorship (EFJ, 2016). In this sense, there are several elements that could lead to self-censorship, whether it being conscious to the media worker or subconscious (O'Leary & Lázaro, 2011).

To structure this, Cook and Heilmann (2013) distinguish two types of self-censorship, being public self-censorship and private self-censorship. The first refers to self-censorship whereby the censor and censee are apart, while by the second the censor and censee are the same person, as specified below.

2.3.1.1. Public self-censorship: the notion of safety and threat

Cook and Heilmann (2010, p. 2) define public self-censorship as *"a range of individual reactions to a public censorship regime."* This means that there is a public censor that becomes part of the individual and triggers the individual to censor himself. Thus, a type of threat is present, of which causes the self-censorship.

Self-censorship caused by individual fear is one of the ways in which it could take place (Yesil, 2014), and which, according to the Council of Europe (COE) (2016) and UNESCO (2014) *does* take place in Europe. As pointed out by the Index on Censorship (2014) this fear, in recent times, is caused by concrete threats, murder or violence of journalists. A possible issue hereby is the impunity of those who pursue this murder or violence. Though UNESCO (2014) argues that it hasn't been a great issue in Western Europe, the Index on Censorship states many cases aren't investigated properly and many go unpunished. Voorhoof (2014) confirms this by stating it often takes years in Europe to deal with such cases. The recent terrorist attacks done in various areas of Europe haven't done this any good. As Carlsson (2016) points out, there has been a rise in the amount of propaganda videos that have been spread by terrorist groups. Such videos are filled with threats to feed this fear of the West. Hereby, they are considered special attempts to silence journalists in their reporting (De Rouck, 2000). Thus, sensitive topics such as the refugee crisis or the Panama papers, as mentioned by EFJ (2016), are often handled with much more thought and concern, often leading to self-censorship.

Self-censorship caused by safety issues could also emerge in a different way: several elements could not be reported at all, out of safety by means of the public or people that are involved (UNESCO, 2014). This tends to also show its traces in Western Europe, for example in dealing with sensitive information regarding the current terrorism issue. The recent 'Brussels Lockdown' forms a prime example here. In this sense, people were asked to stay quiet about

their observations throughout the tracing process of the police, while the press also didn't set any information free (Mapping Media Freedom, 2017).

With such threats that are present in many countries of the world, Yesil (2014) argues that journalists become unable to proceed in quality and complete informing of the public, which could be highly problematic. Though compared to other areas in the world Western Europe still seems to score better, there are certain alarming elements that shouldn't be taken for granted (UNESCO, 2014). Mapping Media Freedom (2017), a group initiative by the Index on Censorship, RSF and EFJ, does show that there have indeed been cases of threat that caused self-censorship. UNESCO (2014, p. 28) confirms this and states it as follows: *"Media professionals working in the region have faced prosecution, threats and attacks, with an overall increase in political and commercial interference."* Thus, despite the relatively good state in comparison to other countries, threat, violence and journalist killings aren't new in Western Europe and religious and political influences appear to be the biggest grounds of such threats (UNESCO, 2014).

2.3.1.2. Private self-censorship: dominant discourses

With private censorship Cook and Heilmann (2010, p. 2) mean *"the suppression by an agent of their own attitudes where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant. Private self-censorship therefore involves an intrapersonal conflict between the actual expressive attitudes held by an agent and the set of permissible expressive attitudes that they endorse."*

Thus, Issues of self-censorship don't only appear through concrete threat and a lack of safety, but can also take place through the individual's attempt to match up with dominant standards and the way one perceives professionalism in journalism, as pointed out by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Important here is that this pressure doesn't derive from the organization's values and rules (which will be outlined in chapter 2.7), but merely the individual's idea of what journalism should look like. In this sense, the journalistic role the journalist pursues, the way the journalist perceives it,

and the expectations the journalist has of this role could impact the way the journalist reports (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Journalists may feel they shouldn't write against any views of specific power players to avoid any form of trouble or want to keep their reputation out of fear for losing their job (Yesil, 2014). IGO's such as UNESCO (2014) confirm that there are indeed some issues Western European journalists would avoid reporting about, often related to national security.

2.3.2. Individual bias in Western European press

Another way in which media content can be influenced, is through individual bias. The exact cause of individual bias often can't be stated with certainty. In this sense, Reese (2007) mentions that right-winged critics may blame this more on the individual himself, stating the individual is who he is and thus it is the task of the organization to hire in a balanced way. Groups that are more left-wing may see the fault in this on a higher level, arguing it derives from commercial structures in the media system. Hereby, the strength in this defined analysis model shows to assist in unraveling some of these confusions regarding what causes certain issues (Reese, 2007).

Concretely, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that these personal traits that may impact media content could refer to elements such as gender and ethnicity, as well as the educational backgrounds or political views of the media workers. This could impact the ways in which they perceive the outside world, which could translate into different selection processes and different ways of reporting. However, according to Shoemaker and Reese (2007), this influence is not direct, but mostly expressed through personal and professional attitudes, whereby the latters influence seems to be stronger. Furthermore, the amount of influence the individual could have also depends on the power the individual holds in the organization. According to Hopmann, Van Aelst and Legnante (2011) this shows in the Western world, by stating politically biased reporting is common in this region and could derive from individual issues. This, even though it generally tends to take place on an organizational level and broader ownership (Humphreys, 1996), which is

outlined in section 2.5. Research by Reese and Lewis (2009) points out that it's generally tricky for journalists to *try* to be neutral without showing traces of who they are as individuals. Often journalists *themselves* aren't aware of such processes. Thus, analyzing the internal psychology of journalists and how this reflects in their work could bring about much uncertainty.

Conclusion

There are various ways in which an individual can influence media content, being from self-censoring through threat and safety issues (Yesil, 2014) or perceived professionalism, as well as individual bias through more subtle identification elements of the journalist (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Generally, Western Europe may not have any large scale issues related to press freedom on individual level, though, however, there are certain elements that could be alarming, such as impunity issues (Voorhoof, 2014) and issues regarding increasing violence, threat and involvement. In this region religious and political influence appears to be the biggest threat hereby, as pointed out through analysis by IGO UNESCO (2014). Furthermore, journalists have shown to have experienced sensitivity with certain topics (UNESCO, 2014) as well as individual bias taking its ground in journalism content (Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante, 2011). The latter two may often be less concrete and thus more complicated to take care of (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996), but should nonetheless be kept in consideration, seeing it's close ties with press freedom.

2.4. FINDINGS THROUGH ROUTINES

Preface

Besides restrictions caused by conscious or subconscious self-censorship, the journalists' daily routines and practices can also cause a limitation for the outcome of the content and has the ability to directly influence it. Structure in the journalists' work place is a necessity, seeing it could help organize and schedule news both for the journalist and the audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Moreover, Nowak (2007) points out that journalistic routines, if properly

practiced, could benefit press freedom and pluralism. However, this also means that there are strict rules as to what a journalist can and can't do (Reese, 2007). Reese (2007, p. 37) states it as follows: *"Job routines do limit individuals in what they can do. (…). Every job (…) must have structure, and every creative activity is processed through certain structured rules."* The same routine rules could then lead to time, access or selection constraints, of which all could affect media content, potentially for the negative and of which are highly interconnected (Reese, 2007). In this sense, it can constrict journalists in their freedom of providing quality content (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Within this section routine elements that may restrict the journalist in his freedom to write quality content, being time, access or selection elements will be outlined separately.

2.4.1. The notion of time in journalistic production

Journalism as a profession has been under pressure, including in Western society. What lies at the base of this is the increasing turn to the online environment, the competition that this brings about and the search for new business models (Picard, 2014). Picard (2014) refers to this as a 'changing ecosystem'. What some of these modern changes have brought about, and which could also be argued to benefit the audience, is a more frequent news update, which means journalists often work under time pressure (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008). As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) state, journalists must deliver, despite any time and space constraints, and journalists often lack time to check reported facts. This is more extreme in times when constant updates are expected (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian, 2011). In this sense, the notion of time also applies for the audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Hereby, the audience' way of reading journalistic content has expanded from merely primetime to various hours of the day for shorter periods of time (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian, 2011). These are elements journalists are ought to take into consideration, especially in an environment that has shown to be increasingly competitive (Picard, 2014).

Time pressure of journalists, of which is common in Western society could lead to a lack of fact-checking, and thus possibly a distortion in informing the

audience in a democratic society (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008). Separating truth from lies becomes more difficult in this sense, of which McChesney (2012) brings to light. According to McChesney such elements urgently need to be rethought in order for democracy to be able to function, as it forms a part of what is normatively be expected of journalism.

2.4.2. Issues of information gathering

Another notion that may be relevant to keep into consideration as a possible constraint for journalists through daily routines, is the issue of information gathering. Keane and Reston (2010), who have proceeded an in-depth analysis of journalistic daily routines and practices and its impact on the quality of the content, argue that factuality can never be achieved with the sources used to gather information. In this sense, there has been a preference to gather information from those sources that confirm the 'primary definition' given to elements, whilst efforts to challenge such dominant definitions and ideas to social issues are often ignored or labeled as soft news (Keane & Reston, 2010). Harcup (2003) confirms this with his analysis on the differences between mainstream and alternative press. He adds to this that journalists often use positions of social and political power as sources, as though their opinions may be more valuable than others. Keane and Reston (2010, p. 81) dig deeper into this with their 'hierarchy of credibility', stating that *"participants will take it as a given that members of the highest group are best placed to define 'the way things really are' due to their 'knowledge of truth'."* This, while *"members of lower groups whose definition of reality, because of this subordinate status, can be only partial and distorted."* This means that there will always be some opinions left out of the discussion, which may be harmful for pluralism (Keane & Reston, 2010).

Furthermore, to save time and further costs, information is often taken over from other content sources, which could also be a downfall in the quality of the content. Thus, often a journalist doesn't have the freedom to gather information from whichever sources, due to time or budgetary constraints, and it is built into their professional routines to mostly rely on positions of power, of which could harm pluralism (Keane & Reston, 2010).

2.4.3. Gatekeeping process and news values

What determines whether news items are selected or not, depends on 'how valuable' this is perceived by the press itself (Keane & Reston, 2010). At the core of this idea lies the realization that news is not 'a mirror' to society as it is expected to be, but rather is a 'net' that fishes out elements in a pool of happenings in the social world (Tuchman, 1978). While a gatekeeper is a clear necessity to 'routinize the unexpected' (Keane & Reston, 2010), it could also be restricting as to what a journalist can report about (Khan & Haider, 2015).

First off, and especially in modern times of increasing competition and threat, news values are frequently based on what the audience would be interested in. What is considered very valuable, according to research by Keane and Reston (2010), are elements such as negativity (bad news is favored over good news), elite persons, elite nations, continuity, timeliness, conflict, simplification, etc. If more elements, especially in the online environment, are based on what audience or *consumers* want, it is argued that the quality of news may be harmed and more sensationalized, focusing more on soft news rather than hard news. Thus, there is a difference in treating citizens as an audience, whereby providing elements that they *need* is central, or treating citizens as consumers, whereby providing elements that they *want* is central. The latter, in recent terms, seems to often be at stake (McNair, 2009).

Secondly, which topics will be selected also are undermined by economic difficulty as well as deadlines (Keane & Reston, 2010). Also competition plays a strong role in what may or may not be selected (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

By routinely favoring some types of topics over others, there will always be potentially relevant elements left out of the discussion (Keane & Reston, 2010). According to Ursell (2001) news values and the standards of journalism have gone downhill in recent times. While it is expected to be objective and neutral, the selection routines tend to privilege journalistic

standards that strongly fit the organizations priorities (Keane & Reston, 2010), of which also could be harmful in a democracy (McNair, 2009).

Conclusion

As a conclusion one can say that while journalistic routines are strongly needed to provide structure and efficiency, they are at the same time functions of constraints (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 132) hereby describe the press as *"handcuffed by its own routines."*

All of the above outlined forms of constraints in the journalistic routines, could be harmful in informing the audience in a democratic society. Section 2.4.1. shows that deadlines and time constraints could make that journalists don't report certain elements, or report them without properly fact-checking (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008), while section 2.4.2. proves that issues of access could mean that journalists can't always gather information from whichever source, and routinely rely on positions of power (Harcup, 2003; Keane & Reston, 2010). Lastly, section 2.4.3. concludes that the information selection process doesn't always happen as objective as it normatively should (Keane & Reston, 2010; McNair, 2009). Thus, the freedom of journalists in quality reporting could be restrained, of which can be harmful in a democracy (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

2.5. ORGANIZATIONAL FINDINGS

Preface

Influence caused by the organization is similar to influence through routines, though, however, routines have boundaries. Such boundaries are carried out by the organization. It thus takes place on a slightly larger scale than the last level. Hereby, this level is more specified on the power of the organization owner, who makes certain decisions that need be kept into account as an employee (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Elements that are generally looked at on this level are *"the roles performed, the way they are structured, the policies flowing through that structure, and the methods used to enforce those policies"* (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 164). Such decisions and rules may

not always make the content so neutral and objective, of which is an important normative expectation of journalism (McNair, 2009). Furthermore, what often lies at the base of any decision or policy are economic elements (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), of which, as established in section 2.4.2. could limit individual journalists in what they can do (Keane & Reston, 2010). Lastly, seeing power of the organization owners can have an impact on the employee's freedom and hereby on the content outcome (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Thus, in this section firstly the organizational stance will be outlined, followed up by an analysis of the hierarchal relationship within the organization, to lastly get into restricting budgetary elements.

2.5.1. Organizational (political) stance

While in the United States partisan media is becoming more abrupt and visible, with Fox News as a prime example (Kuypers, 2014), in Western Europe, generally, the evolution is happening differently. Western Europe started out with a politicized and pillarized trend (Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante, 2011). The press was highly biased, almost becoming a true parallel to the political world (Seymour-Ure, 1974). According to Hopmann, Van Aelst and Legnante (2011) this started changing, on one hand due to the emergence of a public broadcaster, which required a balance in their reporting, on the other hand when commercial structures appeared in the early days, whereby the organizations tried to reach as wide of an audience as possible. In recent terms, as media concentration started increasing, of which is further outlined in section 2.6.3.1., such partisan elements were questioned and more often replaced with neutrality and objectivity as a norm. Thus, generally, Western European press has known its way to a more depoliticized and depillarized environment (Artero, 2015) in contrast to the US, whereby traces of the two-party system become visible (Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante, 2011).

However, despite this positive outlook some political bias is still visible in journalism (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). In first instance the journalists' own political and personal views may impact the outcome (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), as outlined above in section 2.3.2. On the other hand, according to

Kuhn and Nielsen (2013, p. 3) media organizations *"do their daily work in constant and close contact with elected officials and their aides",* thus using politicians as legitimate sources in news coverage. Political influence in their work could then lead to cases of censorship (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Lastly, traces of this pillarized environment of the past still remain, as some newspapers are known to be more 'leftist' or 'rightist' in their ways of reporting about societal problems (Artero, 2015).

2.5.2. Hierarchal relationship in the organization: professional autonomy

As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out, organization owners can impact an employee's freedom in several ways. The amount of freedom a journalist has within the organization is important, as interference by the employer could restrict or censor journalists in their reporting. It is such organizational elements and trends that tend to play a large role in harming professional autonomy for journalists (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Furthermore, according to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) professional autonomy and press freedom are interrelated, positively impacting one another.

Hereby ownership structures appear to be important elements in impacting journalists' freedom. In this sense, journalists in state-owned organizations tend to experience less freedom than those in privately owned media organizations (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Another finding includes that, according to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013, p. 138) generally *"journalists with higher ranks in a newsroom's hierarchy have more power to shape editorial decisions and, as a consequence, may feel more autonomous."* Hereby, journalists that are less experienced and have a lower ranking report feeling less free, being undermined by those in a higher hierarchal position. Those journalists have less choice in *"terms of stories, topics, angles, and story framing"* (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013, p. 149).

Thus, not only the business model that prevails within the organization tends to know its impact, but also the 'ranking' of the journalist in the organization plays a role in the amount of freedom he/she can experience (Reich & Hanitzsch).

2.5.3. Budgetary aspects

Budgetary elements can restrict an organization in what they can and can't do, being with the sources they can gather, the amount of employees they can afford, etc. Thus, through this quality journalism can be at threat in case of financial shortage (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Generally, as indicated above, journalism is part of a rapidly changing environment, in which their business models are ought to be reviewed to work more efficiently. Originally, written press works through their two-sided business model, whereby they depend on both audience as well as advertising revenues. Due to the lack of scarcity of information content, the audience has been more present online, which leads to a denying motivation to invest in print media. Advertisers go where the audience is mostly present, which is online. Though the written press has been increasingly present online, they still fail to gain revenue sources, due to the high amount of competition, which leads to strong uncertainty (Picard, 2014). Thus, shortly summarized, such economic uncertainty the written press is generally undermined with in recent times brings about many challenges, such as the *"loss of audiences (…), the diminishing effectiveness of the mass media business model, the lingering effects of the economic crisis, and the impact of digital competitors"* (Picard, 2014, p. 273).

Furthermore, investigative journalism is generally known to be expensive (Houston, 2010), making it less attractive for news organizations to invest in as well as making it unattractive for the journalists themselves to take part in. Not only is it expensive, but it also is risky, as one single investigation can take months, potentially with no relevant findings for society (Kaplan, 2013). Rather, media organizations choose for economic certainty, being to focus on the audience as consumers. In the online environment media organizations are better informed on what the audience wants, prioritizing sensational elements (Picard, 2014). According to Kaplan (2013) this leads to an underinvestment in in-depth, critical, and investigative reporting, leaving the individual journalists with the lack of freedom to proceed in this kind of journalism.

However, there are platforms that still support and prioritize investigative journalism (Houston, 2010). A clear example of such a platform in Western Europe is Journalismfund.eu, formerly known as Fonds Pascal Decroos (Journalismfund.eu, s.d.). Thus, according to Houston (2010) more and more investigative journalists are seeking financial support from such non-profit organizations.

Conclusion

Throughout these sub-chapters one can conclude that there are indeed flaws on organizational level as regards to press freedom (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). On one hand, though in Western Europe there is a trend towards more politically neutral media organizations, traces of politicized media are still present (Artero, 2015) and the press still is known to have close ties with elected officials (Kuhn and Nielsen, 2013), possibly leading to non-neutral reporting or forms of censorship (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Furthermore, there are some precautions to be made regarding the hierarchal relationships in the organization, in which generally less experienced journalists have less professional autonomy, especially state-owned organizations (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Lastly, budgetary elements of the organization could strongly restrict journalists in what they can do (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The recent emergence of economic uncertainty for written press thus isn't promising hereby (Picard, 2014). This is a bad sign for investigative journalism, which is costly, risky, and takes up a lot of time (Kaplan, 2013).

2.6. FINDINGS ON INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Preface

Influence on information content deriving from the institutional level, refers to any relationship the organization has with outside parties, which may determine the outcome (Reese, 2007). In the previous chapters influence structures *within* the organization are discussed, being from the individual worker, the working routines, to organizational rules and challenges. In this

chapter, as well as the following chapter, the focus will be on elements the media organization isn't in control of. Media organizations' decisions aren't merely based on their own will, but are challenged by elements from outside that are ought to be kept into consideration for the success of the organization. A wide variety of elements outside the organization could know their impact on the outcome (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). However, the focus here will mostly lie on those elements in relation to press freedom. The first part will cover the legal framework regarding press freedom, followed up by transparency and access elements and lastly outside factors that influence independence.

2.6.1. Legal framework

Press freedom has come a long way, including in Western-Europe, originally deriving from a less press free environment (Martens, 2005). Though there are many variations regarding the press freedom situation in European countries, press freedom is still recognized as a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2007). Press freedom is legally protected on several levels, being on national level, EU level, and even outside of the EU, as pointed out by a press freedom briefing of the European Parliament (2015). Generally, press freedom should be highly protected in Western-Europe in a legal point of view. It knows its strict place in the constitution in various ways (Martens, 2005). Article 19 of the universal Declaration of Human Rights states the following:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 2008, p. 19).

Press freedom is also protected through the European Convention on Human Rights since 1950, with its initial purpose to broaden the national legal protection (Martens, 2005). Article 10 on Freedom of expression states the following:

1. "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises" (Council Of Europe, s.d., p. 11).

2. "The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary" (Council Of Europe, s.d., p. 11).

Furthermore, in 2005 a new Law of Protection of sources was introduced in Belgium to protect journalistic sources. Concretely this means journalists can refuse access to their sources, unless such information is of crucial need in relation to a threat of one or more persons. This law is a new step in the protection of press freedom and could form an inspiration to other countries (Voorhoof, 2005).

Lastly, member states, either on a voluntary or mandatory basis, take part in self-regulation in which press councils could process complaints made before it leading potential lawsuits. Such elements are based on codes of conducts, covering elements such as privacy, reputation and private data. Despite the presence of self-regulation, it has shown to lack efficiency regarding the legal standards as well as the mechanisms of sanctioning (European Parliament, 2015).

Thus, Western-Europe knows a good dose of legal protection. However, this does not go without limitations and/or potential abuse in practice (European Parliament, 2015; Voorhoof, 2015) as will be shown in the following sub-elements.

2.6.2. Transparency and information access

Transparency with sources from potentially impacting institutions has been recognized as an important indicator of press freedom, as pointed out by RSF (2016). In this sense, it is crucial for journalists to be able to access unrestricted information in order to have a press free environment (Becker, Vlad & Nusser, 2007). Legally, access to various administrative documents held by the government should be guaranteed. The law regarding disclosure of administration has been present for over thirty years (Amicorum & Herweijer, 2012).

Despite the legal guarantee, however, access to such sources has appeared to be made difficult for journalists. This especially in relation to topics that are relevant for society (Voorhoof, 2014). According to Voorhoof (2014) transparency has been rejected many times, often through dishonest excuses. This means that journalists' process to access or even partially access requested sources *could* and *has* been impeded, by for example leaving journalists forced to pass through other institutions first, such as the State Council. According to Amicorum and Herweijer (2012) this law has often been forgotten or neglected in practice. Thus, this could in first instance derive from too little knowledge of the law in general or a lack of motivation to share such sources with journalists (Amicorum & Herweijer, 2012).

In this sense, a highly important law for press freedom has appeared to be under pressure, which shows the promising legal structure isn't always effective in practice (Amicorum & Herweijer, 2012).

2.6.3. Journalistic independence

Journalistic independence, generally defined by RSF (2016, p. 1) as interference of *"political, governmental, business and religious power and influence"* forms a direct indicator of press freedom, as pointed out by the NGO. Such independence has a fundamental importance for journalism to fulfill its role as a fourth estate (Schultz, 1998). According to Voorhoof (2015) independent journalism is under pressure throughout many European

countries. On one hand media independence can be harmed through ownership structures, of which is suspected to have an impact on pluralism and diversity (European Parliament, 2015). On the other hand, media independence can refer to interference structures from outside parties (Voorhoof, 2015). Both will be briefly outlined below.

2.6.3.1. Media Concentration: diversity and pluralism

The recent globalization and convergence in media, which, as pointed out in section 2.5.3., has brought about new difficulties for journalism, which has lead to an increasing trend of concentration. This may know its impact on diversity and pluralism. Media concentration appears to be strongly present in Western Europe (Thorgeirsdottir, 2004). Thorgeirsdottir (2004, p. 383) hereby states that *"four out of five daily newspapers in Western Europe have disappeared in the last 80 years".* The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) (2014), who study the state of media pluralism amongst member states have come to the result that several member states, including Belgium, are at high risk for cross media ownership concentration. In Belgium, for instance, the Flemish Regulator for Media (VRM) (2015) finds that there are just four media groups that dominate the media landscape, being De Vijver Media, Mediahuis, Medialaan and the VRT. Various forms of horizontal, vertical and cross media concentration are present, meaning it forms a complex range of interrelated structures, all through which may know its harm on the content outcome.

2.6.3.2. Interference

According to Voorhoof (2015), independent journalism is under pressure due to national interferences that weren't dealt with by the European Court of Human Rights. Though generally they stand for protecting press freedom in the absolute, several cases, including in Western Europe point towards the opposite. This, by sometimes not standing with the media organization in cases of being accused. Throughout several cases elements were brought up in support of claiming the media organization would be at wrong. This interference generally takes place by *"governments, legal restrictions, preventative censorship, judiciary prosecutions or claims of damage"*

(Voorhoof, 2014, p. 1). For Belgium, specifically, preventative censorship takes place in various ways and is generally accepted by judges much too quick. This is a clear violation to the constitution that clearly forbids censorship (Voorhoof, 2014).

This interference is mostly a threat to in-depth, critical, investigative journalism. Seeing the lengthy procedures of handling such elements, it could lead to feelings of insecurity, intimidation and fear for journalists, which could then impact their motivation to participate in in-depth, investigative journalism. It thus becomes a direct form of threat (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013; Voorhoof, 2014).

Conclusion

What this chapter shows is that Western Europe, despite its strong legal framework (European Parliament, 2015), isn't saved from potentially negative influence structures outside of the media organization (Voorhoof, 2015). Some of its legal strengths show through article 19, as a universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 2008), as well as article 10 in the European Convention on Human Rights (Martens, 2005). The law on protection on sources in Belgium has been a milestone for the protection of press freedom (Voorhoof, 2005). However, certain aspects need improvement, such as mechanisms of self regulation which have shown to be inefficient (European Parliament, 2015), the law regarding disclosure of administration, of which has been shown to have been taken for granted through a lack of transparency (Amicorum & Herweijer, 2012; Voorhoof, 2014), the large amount of media concentration due to the changing media environment, which could harm pluralism and diversity (Thorgeirsdottir, 2004) and lastly, interference by outside parties which create fear and insecurity amongst journalists, that is often taken too lightly and threatens in-depth, critical journalism (Voorhoof, 2015; Voorhoof, 2014).

2.7. FINDINGS ON IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL

Preface

On the most macro level, the idea goes that ideological elements within social systems can leave their mark on information content. Not only do ideologies potentially leave their mark on the content, but journalists may also have a role in keeping this in stance (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 212) define ideology as *"a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society."* In this sense, people collectively attach meaning to certain elements in society (Reese, 2007). This cohesive force appears rather naturally throughout the system in which it is built (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

2.7.1. Socio-cultural Ideology and the role of journalism: Top down or bottom up?

Socio-cultural ideologies have shown to be present throughout journalism content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). According to Cammaerts and Carpentier (2009, p. 3) mainstream media have *"a preference for dominant (elite) discourses, representations, formats and genres."* As outlined in section 2.4.2., journalists generally tend to favor dominant positions through their routine. Confirming the 'primary definition' given to elements has hereby been the trend, while ignoring or labeling structures that challenge these dominant ideas as soft news (Keane & Reston, 2010). In times of war, such cohesive ideologies become most visible, moving aside critical journalism to dehumanize the enemy and legitimize their own government's decisions by representing them innocently. In such times mainstream journalism generally rarely deviates from the status quo (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009). Nevertheless, such elements don't only show during times of war (Billig, 1995). According to Billig (1995) constant nationalistic elements are hidden throughout journalism content. These rather subtle references are seen as 'acceptable' without being critically questioned. It provides the public with constant reminders of nationalistic ideologies and where they stand within that framework. In this sense, the mainstream media is shown to provide the

public with such dominant ideas and ideologies in a more vertical, top-down matter (Harcup, 2003). Such strategies could threaten one of journalism's normative ideals, being to be a watchdog over power positions (McNair, 2009). Furthermore, it could limit journalists in their writing, possibly leading to self-censorship (O'Leary & Lázaro, 2011), whereby alternative ideologies don't, or rarely come to light (Harcup, 2003).

Lastly, however, there is always space to challenge dominant ideology, on one hand through blogs and various forms of citizen journalism (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009), on the other through alternative media, which deviates from traditional journalistic procedures and knows a more horizontal approach, subvert from dominant ideology (Harcup, 2003).

Conclusion

To conclude the above one can say that the use of such dominant structures could have a negative impact on journalism content, being as a threat to journalism's role as a watchdog over power positions (McNair, 2009), through not providing enough alternative ideas (Harcup, 2003; Keane & Reston, 2010), or to limit journalists in what they can or can't write about, possible leading to self-censorship (O'Leary & Lázaro, 2011). Though, in this Western environment there is always space for forms of counter power (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009; Harcup, 2003).

Conclusion literature overview

To conclude the literature overview, one can state that, though there are no large-scale problems regarding press freedom in this geographical region (Czepek, Hellwig & Nowak, 2009), each level shows it's possible restrictions. On one hand the individual journalist could influence media content through self-censorship due to threat and safety issues (Yesil, 2014), perceived professionalism, as well as individual bias (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). On the other hand the freedom of the journalist could be restrained through his working routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) which could as a result impact the quality of information content through a lack of fact checking caused by time pressure (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008), not being able to access certain

sources or relying on the wrong ones (Harcup, 2003; Keane & Reston, 2010) and the often non-objective routines behind the gatekeeping process (Keane & Reston, 2010; McNair, 2009). Furthermore, structures within media organizations also could show their flaws through politicized traces (Artero, 2015) through their links with elected officials (Kuhn and Nielsen, 2013) possibly leading to forms of censorship (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013), through the professional autonomy of journalists varying according to their experience and through budgetary issues which could impact the freedom to be able to proceed in investigative journalism (Kaplan, 2013). A major strength regarding Belgian press freedom lies in the strong legal framework (European Parliament, 2015), whereby the law on protection of sources forms an example for other countries (Voorhoof, 2005), though elements regarding the disclosure of public documents could use improvement (Amicorum & Herweijer, 2012; Voorhoof, 2014). Further working points include the recent media concentration, which could harm pluralism and diversity (Thorgeirsdottir, 2004), as well as a lack of light shed on interference in journalism work by outside parties, threatening critical journalism (Voorhoof, 2015; Voorhoof, 2014). Lastly, the possible presence of dominant structures in society could threaten journalism's role as a watchdog (McNair, 2009), though the Western European atmosphere provides space for platforms that go against such ideologies (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009; Harcup, 2003).

3. Empirical overview

introduction empirical overview

Before the concrete findings of this research will be delineated, the methodological research design, concerning both the rationale and sampling method will be deepened. This is followed up by an analysis concerning the interview topic overview and an identification of the respondents. Finally, the limitations and further discussion of the research will be outlined.

3.1. METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1.1. Rationale

The aim of this master thesis is to grasp *the extent* of freedom experienced in media by Belgian investigative journalists. To be able to provide a clear answer to this, a qualitative approach seems more useful to this. Generally, qualitative studies are more focused on grasping an element of the social world in depth. The opinion, as well as the daily reality of the respondents is hereby central to this type of research. Usually qualitative research questions handle complex themes, and aim to holistically understand the context. Qualitative research thus often happens on the base of texts rather than numbers (Mortelmans, 2013). This applies for this research, seeing as an in-depth approach is needed to truly comprehend investigative journalists' view on this notion. In this thesis the aim is not to gather statistical information, but to recognize certain trends based on detailed information provided by the respondent.

As a research method, in-depth interviews seem to be the most suitable here. Generally, an in-depth approach can allow to bring more sensitive topics to light (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013) of which is needed in discussing a topic like this one. For investigative journalists to talk about harmful factors on a personal or organizational level might be extremely delicate, whereby a correct approach and environment is needed. The goal here is thus not to bring different standpoints to light, of which focus groups may be more suited

for, but mostly to frame the interviewees understanding of the topic in detail and interpret this as such (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013).

Like mostly in in-depth interviews, a semi-structured approach will be used (Bryman, 2012). This means that *"the researcher has a list of questions of fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply"* (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). In this sense, the respondent can still deviate from these topics if wished. Within this thesis, several levels of influence are identified as a way to structure this notion. Generally, the aim is to grasp the opinion of the investigative journalist on each level, to be able to comprehend *the extent* of press freedom they experience. However, ways in which is reflected about these levels are flexible; investigative journalists may offer completely new insights to the research topic. Bryman (2012, p. 471) states it as follows: *"The emphasis must be on how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events - that is, what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behavior."* Hereby one can conclude that a semi-structured interview can be very flexible (Bryman, 2012).

After conducting the interviews, transcripts will be made in order to start an in-depth analysis. The goal of the analysis in a qualitative environment is to grasp meaning in the data, as well as identifying specific themes and patterns to understand it in a more global picture, rather than being able to be representative (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013). According to Mortelmans (2013) the analysis process starts off by breaking off the data in several pieces, in order to build it back up. Generally, this happens through the process of coding on open, axial and selective levels (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013). This technique will be used in this thesis in order to identify patterns in investigative journalists' views on the notion.

3.1.2. Sampling

To operationalize the research question, in-depth interviews with Belgian investigative journalists and experts are proceeded. Though different types of investigative journalists could be distinguished, no distinction will be made in

this thesis. Thus, each journalist with an 'investigative approach' is relevant to interview. Hereby, a sample of the population will be taken. Seeing the qualitative approach, fewer people will be queried in comparison to quantitative research where generalization is a central given (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013). According to Bryman (2012, p. 416) *"discussions in qualitative research tend to revolve around the notion of purposive sampling"*, meaning that the research question shows an element on what is ought to be studied. This applies within this thesis. Moreover, participants are retrieved through investigative journalism organizations such as journalismfund.eu, VVOJ, IHECS academy, etc. Hereby, interviewees are selected at random throughout organizations. However, many relevant respondents are retrieved through snowball sampling, meaning that through contact with some investigative journalists others are found.

Unlike quantitative research, the sample size in qualitative research commonly goes until there is saturation on data and theory. The goal here is to be able to conduct a theoretical generalization by generating theory out of the findings (Bryman, 2012).

Further information about this can be found in the limitations of the research in the thesis.

3.2. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

3.2.1. Analysis

Within the analysis section on one hand the topic list of the semi-structured interview will be outlined, followed up by an identification of the interviewed respondents.

3.2.1.1. In-depth interview topic overview

The topic list used to interview the respondents, which can be retrieved in *Appendix1*, is structured using the *hierarchy of influences* developed by Reese (2007). To be able to provide an answer and operationalize the two identified sub-questions, being *"in which ways is press freedom in Western*

Europe at strength according to investigative journalists?" and *"in which ways is press freedom in Western Europe restricted according to investigative journalists?"* the interview questions are aimed to have an open approach to explore how the respondents frame the strengths and weaknesses, of which below a brief overview:

- **TOPIC 1**: Topic one investigates to what extent the investigative journalist believes the individual level of the journalist influences Western European press freedom, by asking questions about the risk of reporting on sensitive topics, threat, interference and individual bias.

- **TOPIC 2:** Topic two investigates to what extent the investigative journalist believes work routines influence Western European press freedom, by asking questions about the daily routines at the job, routines of information gathering and the quality of news.

- **TOPIC 3:** Topic three investigates in which ways investigative journalists believe media organizations impact Western European press freedom by asking about the experienced freedom and professional autonomy in the work place.

- **TOPIC 4:** Topic four assesses to what extent the investigative journalist believes that outside elements influence Western European press freedom, by asking questions regarding the legal protection, the independence of political and economic influence and the accessibility to sources.

- **TOPIC 5:** Topic five deepens to what extent the investigative journalist believes that the status quo and dominant ideology influences Western European press freedom, by asking their perception on the impact of political correctness on journalism, on the watchdog role of journalism and on challenging dominant ideas.

Thus, by coding the respondent's answers using this framework, the research questions will be answered.

3.2.1.2. Identification of respondents

A total of 19 respondents participated, consisting of various backgrounds, working for media companies such as Knack (3), Journalismfund.eu (2), Le Soir (2), VRT (6), De Morgen (1), Apache (1), VTM (1) and a few working as freelancers (2). Though most respondents have experience in investigation through the written press, a vast few (4) have a background in investigative work for television, both within the news as well as in documentary making. 12 of the respondents claim to have more than 10 years of experience in the investigative journalism branch.

Age category	**17men/2women**
20-30	1 respondent
30-40	2 respondents
40-50	2 respondents
50-60	11 respondents
60-70	3 respondents

Table 1: Age description of the interview respondents

As seen above, the vast majority is between 50 and 60 years of age.

Out of the 19 respondents, the following 9 are considered experts:

- **Kristof Clerix** (award-winning investigative journalist Knack, known for his contribution to the Panama papers through ICIJ, and his work on espionage in Brussels)
- **Ides Debruyne** (Managing director Journalismfund.eu)
- **Alain Lallemand** (investigative journalist Le Soir, known for his contribution to the Panama papers through ICIJ and his work around the Russian mafia)

- **Luc Pauwels** (award-winning investigative journalist VRT, well known for his book “De Keizer van Oostende” along with Wim Van den Eynde, which brought about journalistic chaos)
- **Douglas De Coninck** (investigative journalist De Morgen, known for his investigations around the case of ‘Dutroux’)
- **Frank Van Laeken** (freelance journalist, previous editor in chief at Sporza and book writer about financial malpractice in football)
- **Dirk Voorhoof** (connected at the Human Rights Center, expertise in media law and involved with the ECPMF in promoting independent journalism)
- **Karl Van den Broeck** (editor in chief of Apache, promoting independent, investigative journalism)
- **Wim Van den Eynde** (award-winning investigative journalist VRT, known for his book along with Luc Pauwels, as well as his investigative work for Panorama)

Those who chose to remain anonymous will be referred to as ‘respondent plus the number of the transcript’. For more information on the backgrounds of the respondents, the interview transcripts can be retrieved in *Appendix4*.

3.2.2. Results

As outlined above, the analysis of qualitative data starts by breaking off the data in several pieces through coding on three different levels, of which can be found in *Appendix6* (Bryman, 2012; Mortelmans, 2013). Each section has it’s own coding diagram, of which will be displayed both within the sub-chapters and in the appendices in better quality. After assessing each subchapter, a brief global conclusion will be outlined.

3.2.2.1. *The individual journalist and press freedom*

In order to assess the extent of freedom felt in Western Europe by the respondents, firstly questions were asked regarding how safe the investigative journalists feel or how safe the experts perceive investigative journalists to be. Furthermore questions were asked concerning the individual bias and possible influence on media content caused hereby.

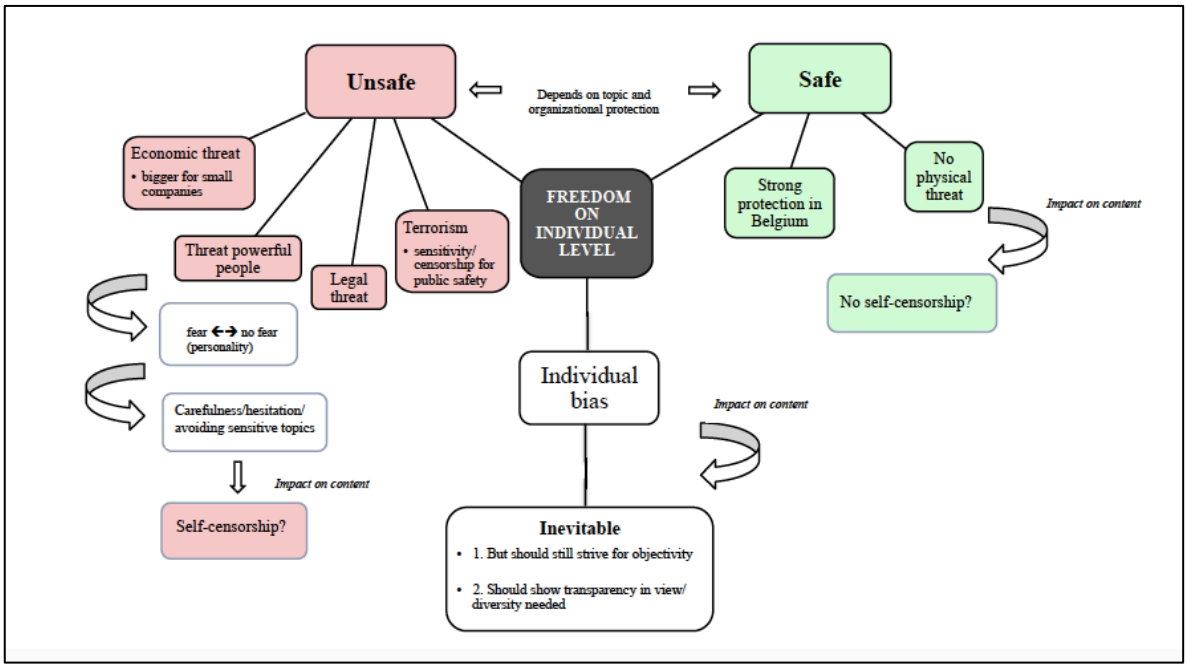

Figure 1: Coding diagram 1

In first instance respondents referred to the fact that whether or not one can speak about threat depends on the topic the investigative journalist is covering. Not only the sensitivity of the topic plays a role, but also the group element in doing investigation seems to add on to whether or not an investigative journalist feels safe.

> *"You know one of the good protections in terms of journalism freedom is to make sure you have, I would say a critical mass of people that are working on the same topic. (...) If I'm alone, for the people that try to censor you it's just easy, they kill you, that's it. They kill you between brackets."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 2)

Furthermore, the importance of being protected on organizational level, of which the chief editor plays a big role in, impacts the notion of feeling safe and protected.

> *"And now, the journalists who proceed in that kind of work* (investigation)*, notice that by us there is a lack of structures and mechanisms to fulfill the needed protection." (Wim Van den Eynde, VRT, p. 1)*

Lastly, also the country size seems to have an impact on the safety and freedom for journalists to take part in critical reporting.

> *"The smaller the country, the more reluctant the journalists are to do investigative journalism or to take sensitive topics."* (Ides Debruyne, Journalismfund.eu, p. 5)

Generally, the quality of safety measures is recognized by most respondents, especially in making comparisons to other countries globally. Special emphasis was hereby made on the protective mechanisms in Belgium, of which more will be outlined in section 3.2.2.4.

> *"Have I always felt safe? Yes, of course. You have to look at in a broader perspective. Especially when you look at it in a worldwide perspective, you'll see that we can't complain. Of course, there are definitely elements that could improve, but globally, and then I'm talking about worldwide, I think we can't complain."*(Dirk Leestmans, VRT, p. 1)

> *"We are living in a country where we are protected as journalists although we are attacked and people fire complaints against us and they want us to pay a lot of money, uhm, we still rely on the judges to protect the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech, so it's easy to be a courageous journalist in Belgium, it's not that easy in the rest of the world or in many countries in the rest of the world, so, uhm, and I think if you follow the rules journalists have to follow and they are laid down in our, uhm, ethical codes then you are safe."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 2)

However, most investigative journalists have claimed to have felt unsafe before by having experienced a form of threat, often by powerful groups and often economic of nature.

> *"The problem today is not being killed physically, the problem today is being killed economically. So the pressure for this is really huge. So, I'm unable to publish books, for example I wouldn't publish investigate books because investigative books means that it's really easy for the*

> *bad guy to have a trial against you and make you loose, I wouldn't say millions, but you could loose easily 100 000 euro, just to defend yourself and prove that you are right."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 3)

Hereby the stronger emphasis seems to be on media companies that are smaller due to their vulnerability. The recent case of Apache has hereby been mentioned several times as a key demonstration to today's threats in Western Europe. Though often the respondents assumed Apache is going to win their case, the fact that it is extremely costly was stressed, forming a threat either way.

> *"In case of Apache and Optima, it's crazy. They are going to win it anyway, but it asks a lot of energy, it asks a lot of time, a lot of money, anyhow, and indeed I think if you are a small medium, a start medium and you find that gold in your mine, I think maybe you say "I haven't seen it", because we can't afford to get to court."*(Respondent 2, retired (former judge Journalismfund.eu), p. 10)

Moreover, reporting about powerful individuals or companies doesn't always go without consequences, of which is recognized by the respondents.

> *"So you have to be aware when writing about things such as intelligence, or very rich billionaires, that they might want to, you know bring you down."* (Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 3)

This also counts for politicians, who have been claimed to create pressure on journalists. Also, legal improvement could be made in order for journalists to feel more safe to freely report critically, seeing the uncertainly of law cases.

> *"You know when you are sued you do not know how the judge can react, okay, so it always leaves a risk."* (Respondent 8, Le Soir, p. 8)

When asked about the impact of terrorism on journalistic freedom and reporting, several respondents pointed towards a censorship both short-term and long-term, all revolving around safety and the risk of offering terrorists potentially helpful information. This makes that not all details are published, that there is a more sensitive way of reporting and that there is uncertainty as to what can be published or not. Moreover, finding a balance between

informing the public, as well as protecting the public seems to not be easy hereby.

> *"And then… and then I thought it was a very difficult balance, because I mean (…) you're not only a journalist but you're also a citizen of the country and that's even more important, you know, that our country stays safe so I decided for instance not to be too detailed in terms of, I decided not to publish the address of the organizations in the article, if they would google, the bad guys with bad intentions, they would find them anyway but I also didn't want to 'de kat bij de melk zetten' I don't know how to say it in English. But ehm, there was ehm, that was a very good question. Terrorism threat level 4, what does it mean for the media? Ehm, it's really a topic that needs debate, I also contacted a journalist organization with that question, what should we do? Should we here censor, in extreme circumstances, censor ourselves or not?"* (Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 13)

Such threat, pressure and uncertainty leads to fear by some, and isn't feared by others, which has to do with the personality of the journalists. What is referred to several times, is the fact that when reporting on sensitive topics, facts have to be properly checked in order to minimize threat.

> *"That's how it works. Threat, no it doesn't scare me. I'm only scared of myself, that I am good enough when they do threaten, to ensure that the facts are solid."* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, Transcript 11, p. 6)

To some, this is considered part of the job as an investigative journalist.

> *"Of course you have to be prepared to be…, you know, if you come too close to things that should stay hidden, uhm, people attack you, people will make uhm, they will threaten you, they will…and even, there are journalists that lose their lives doing their job or… you don't do this job if you want it for glamour or, uhm, it's a civil duty, you have to see it like that."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 1).

What seemed to be quite homogenic in the group of respondents, is that being aware of such threat is important, leading to carefulness or hesitation in reporting or in extremer cases even avoiding sensitive topics, arguably being considered self-censorship.

> *"I have to be honest and say that the last two years I reconsider topics before I take very difficult lobby things and stuff, it could be very tough,*

> *on your mood, on your nights rest, after publishing you can be very tired for a few weeks and now I sometimes consciously investigate on less delicate topics."* (Respondent 18, VRT, p. 2)

The work life of a journalist and it's impact on their private life is also an element that comes back several times.

> *"There is a type of, ehm, division, or a fine line where you, ehm, have to balance on: between how far you can go in critically reporting about someone and how much self-censorship you take part it."* (Respondent 3, Knack, p. 2*)*

Ways as to how to go about this awareness could include not disclosing information about one's private life.

> *"I would not give free my community just to anybody that I haven't met, yea so ehm, there are some precautions that you have to be aware of. Protecting your e-mail through PGP is another example. Sometimes I don't go for my mobile phone but I go to a telephone box in Centraal, central station in Brussels, etc. So it's not only a matter of protecting myself but also protecting my sources."* (Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 4)

Lastly, the respondents were asked about individual bias and if and how this may show in their published content. Almost all respondents agreed that individual bias is inevitable and that neutrality is highly questionable. Here there was a distinguishment between those who believed journalists should still strive for objectivity, while other's, being the vast majority, claimed that being transparent in one's views could be a strength in journalism.

> *"If you make that choice, if you make that process explicit and visible then you are a much better journalist than someone who tries to stay objective. Cause, subjectivity is camouflage for bias, you can claim that you are objective but you had your background, you had your ideas, you had your scope, you had your network, and you will always fall back on that while, you can't, you can't, you can try to go, on the other side and look at problems..., I'm not a racist, but I can try and pretend I am a racist and, and cover the news, of the refugees crossing the Mediterranean from that standpoint, but in the end I will always look for ways to contradict these traces, because I'm not a racist, and it's the other way around as well. And you need journalists from different angles to cover what's going on in the world otherwise we are not well informed."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 9)

Nonetheless, seeing the fact that individual bias is inevitable, respondents agreed that this highlights the importance of diversity in the newsroom.

3.2.2.2. The working routines and press freedom

The extent of press freedom perceived through journalistic routines was measured by asking the respondents questions regarding their daily routines, their information gathering process and the overall impact on the news content. Generally, the respondents consistently seem to stem back to the recent economic crisis taking place in journalism (Picard, 2014), which seems to strongly impact their overall daily routines and programs.

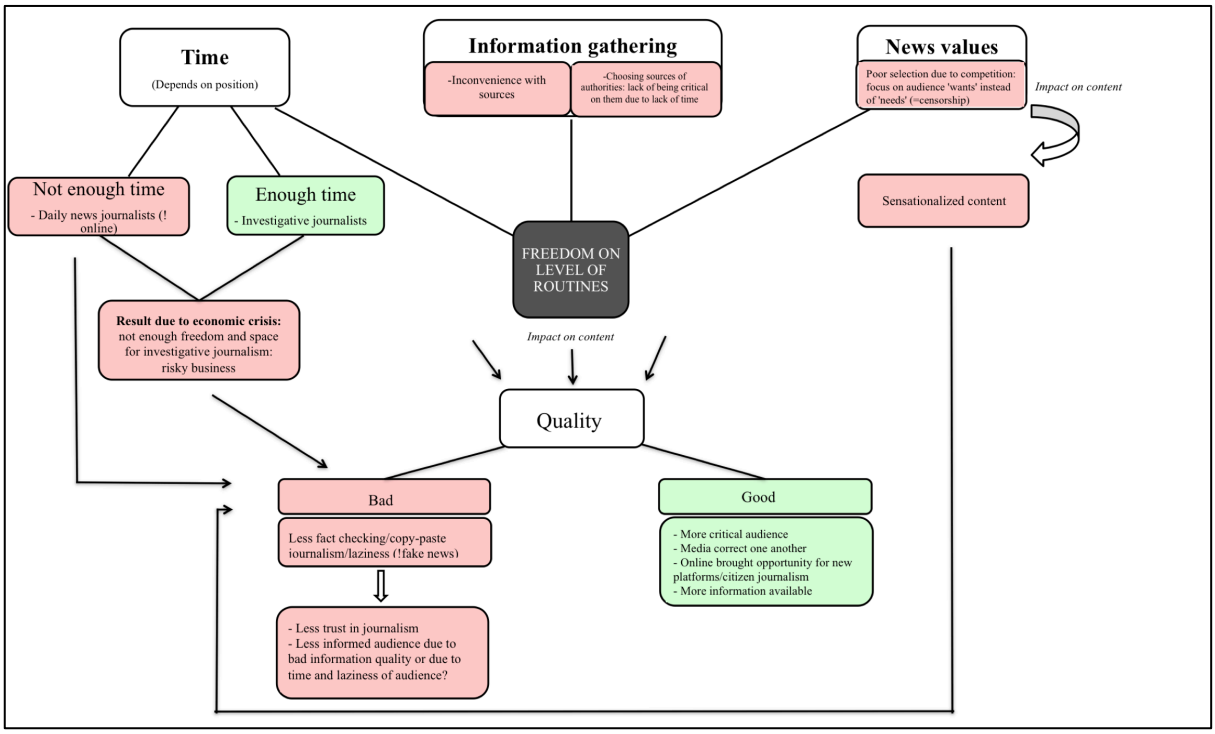

Figure 2: Coding diagram 2

In first instance, as outlined in the literature overview, the changing ecosystem of which brought about economic uncertainty for journalism (Picard, 2014) has lead to journalists working under time pressure (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008). This has shown to be correct according to the experiences of the respondents. The concept 'time' thus becomes an important focal point when talking about freedom through journalistic routines.

> "*We do not have the time to think, and thinking is so important in life.*" (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 3)

According to the respondents, this time pressure appears to result in a lack of fact checking, copy-paste journalism and thus overall laziness. The notion of

fact checking seems to be ought even more difficult in recent times of fake news, having to, with little time, distinguish wrong from right.

> *"In the past, people would suggest that if a politician or president would give a number or would give a figure on a very serious issue like refugees or terrorism, then at least he got the numbers from his advisers, they were checked. But nowadays you hear leaders of the world…Trump people, some politicians in Europe…going on T.V and giving numbers and alternative facts that has no truth background and it's becoming more difficult because in the past we would fact check a picture or video coming from an individual, now we have to do it as well for politicians."* (Majd Khalifeh, VRT, p. 5)

What seems remarkable here, is that a clear distinction can be made between daily news journalists and investigative journalists seeing the nature of their work, whereby daily news journalists work with several deadlines a day and investigative journalists often get a vast period of time to get their content together. There also seemed so be a difference for journalists who have worked at the same media company for several years, 'earning' more freedom and time in their job.

> *"No, no, not anymore, I used to. (…) I'm almost afraid to say it since most of my colleagues complain about having a lack of time and work pressure, but not me. I'm in a different situation, I've been working for this newspaper for so long, ehm, and within just a short period of time many good journalists have left due to different reasons, which makes that by De Morgen they are very, how should I put it, caring for their 'ancients'. So to me they say 'go ahead, try to put something together here and there once a week.'"* (Douglas De Coninck, De Morgen, p. 2)

However, due to this same economic crisis of which is speculated to cause more time pressure (Saltzis & Dickinson, 2008), the in-depth interview results point towards an underinvestment in investigative journalism. Investigative journalism becomes too risky due to the lack of certainty of results, the lengthy time it takes up and the costs that come with it, which in a way still pressures investigative journalists to perform in terms of time. The role of the editor in chief seems to be important in the amount of freedom felt, of which more will be delineated in the next section.

> *"That's already one thing. The fact that there's not enough investigative journalism in Belgium. (…)That means there's uh…there's no tradition, I think that's also problem (…) We are trying to stimulate investigative journalism, but this is…eh... not easy, because one of the things journalists always say is that there is a lack of money…lack of money because investigative journalism is expensive."* (Ides Debruyne, Journalismfund.eu, p. 1)

This leaves journalists who do have ambitions to do an investigation forced to go beyond the newsroom and thus proceed in it in their spear time.

> *"Actually more and more, that's ah…unfortunately the fact that more and more we become relevant because yea, you see that the public needs more accurate news, more in-depth explanations with societies becoming much more complex, powers go up and down on local level and international levels and you need more specialized journalists…ah…who have the power and who are empowered and we can see that most of the investigative journalism isn't…ah…any more creative inside the newsrooms but it's going outside the newsrooms."* (Ides Debruyne, Journalismfund.eu, p. 4)

Seeing the above, media organizations usually have a small selection of investigative journalists, of which also could be speculated to be a marketing strategy of the media company.

> *"I can tell you I never had so much time I have now. (…) I can do anything I like as an investigation. There is no time rush, there is no time limit, almost no time limit. But it has a price. The price is 3 people do that in the whole newsroom. The other one's are not doing investigation anymore, so that's it. (...) Sometimes I think about that, that I'm just the marketing investing, so the journalist that will come in front of the television in order to say "Le Soir does investigation". Le Soir does more investigation today than they have 30 years ago. So, it's really strange, you really have to consider that, concerning the press freedom the investigation there's really segregation between different types of journalists within the same newsroom."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 4)

A lack of time also knows it's impact through the information gathering of the journalist according to the respondents, in the sense that journalists appear to not be critical enough of authorities, while often being 'fooled' by them. Seeing as they often fall back on sources of authorities according to the respondents, this is not a good deal for the final information product.

> *"And then I think 'damn, how often do they try to fool us…authorities and others' and because of the speed of the work we go along with it (…)"* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, Transcript 11, p. 2)

Furthermore, practical inconveniences with sources are also not left out of the question regarding influence on level of routines, as, especially with television as a medium, there are last minute cancellations and access and representation difficulties, whereby trust forms an important element.

Another way in which journalists' freedom is restricted through their routines is through the increasing competition, whereby on one hand they want to be first, and on the other hand whereby news values lie more in what the audience wants instead of needs, leading to a poor information selection and thus a censorship for information that doesn't fit in the norm.

> *"It's probably still going to overcome me, that you go along with the others, but we as journalists really can't do that. And if you, and that's a lecture, if you get caught up in the speed, always quicker and always more, you don't even have a moment to think 'yes but, aren't we just simply running along with the others', seeing the competition we want to be the first…especially time. Murderous. For me, I really have the plea "foot off the gas pedal: we don't have to be the first, we just have to be the best"* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, p. 16)

This is highly criticized by the majority of the respondents, arguing that all journalism should be investigative.

> *"In my point of view, investigative journalism should not exist as a word because every journalist should be an investigator, that's his job. And what happens right now, certainly people who work for news sites, they are not investigators they are 'copy paster's'. They see something, they copy-paste it, translate it and put it on the net. Or they do one interview by phone and fifty minutes later there's an article without checking, double check, triple checking. You can call me old fashioned but I think a journalist should investigate and should always ask questions, not believe everything that is told to him but he should go…basically he shouldn't trust anything or anyone."* (Frank van Laeken, freelancer, p. 4)

All the elements that the economic crisis brings about also show their impact on the overall trust in journalism, as well as the way in which the audience is informed. On one hand this is blamed on the journalists work.

> *"The information that 90% of citizens based on unstructured, dramatic facts, there is very few analysis or very few good background…ehm…yes, I find the quality very low (…)"* (Respondent 12, freelancer, p. 3)

On the other hand it is assumed that the needed information is there, and that the audience is at fault due to being lazy or not making the time.

> *"They don't have the time to look at everything of course, but they just mainly choose one provider which is not a good thing because they hear or read news from one particular point of view. (...) It's also laziness. (…) Or not caring enough, but these people are also voters and I cannot be…um…I don't believe these fifty-two million Trump voters really know what he was all about. (...) Maybe Holland in a fortnight same problem, France in a couple of months. Can you…um…I will put it another way, I think you can blame these people. They should know, they have information available. (...) Yea and…or stay at home, that's another thing. If you go voting and you are not informed, well how stupid can you be nowadays."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 5-6)

However, on the other hand respondents also see the positive throughout this criticism, stating that citizens are more critical than ever and hereby are becoming fellow fact checkers, that media correct one another from their mistakes and that the online environment also brought opportunity for new platforms as well as citizen journalism to arise. Hereby, there is also more hope for a future with more investigation.

> *"I'm also hopeful that in a country like ours, where there is still press freedom that is respected by the authorities, I think there are some shifts possible that we can still go from the daily news bits to real investigating journalism."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 13)

3.2.2.3. *Media organizational structures and press freedom*

Freedom perceived and experienced on organizational level was measured by asking questions regarding interference by and discussion with the editor in chief, the freedom to investigate what they want, the organizational stance and diversity and the overall quality of the content.

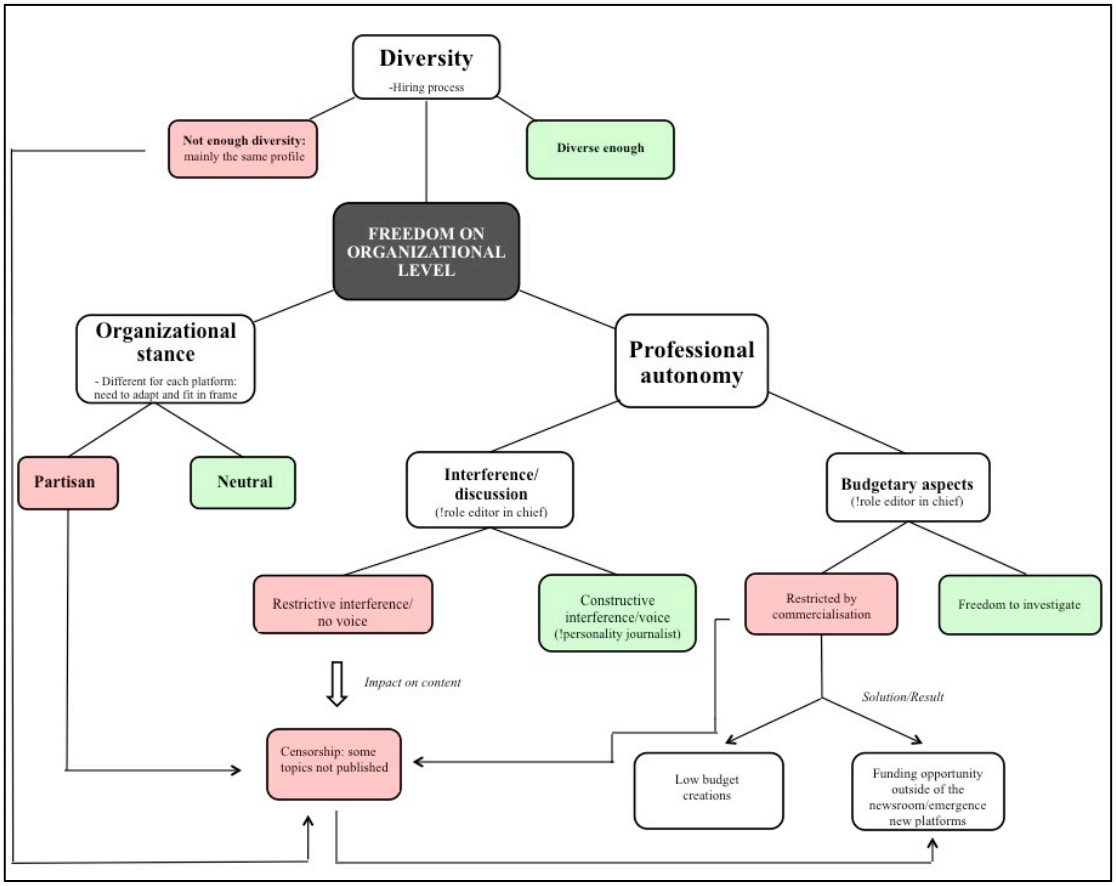

Figure 3: Coding diagram 3

In first instance, though the benefits of the Western European framework are recognized stating that they often get to come up with their own ideas, several respondents criticized media organizations for not having enough diversity in the newsroom. Hereby, journalists hired in news organizations appear to frequently have the same profile; namely white, middle class men, which may know it's impact on the topics published and possibly even overall pluralism.

> *"I'm pretty sure there's not enough pluralism because ehm, it's always the same stuff, you know, I'm a man, I'm white, I'm not rich but I have enough money, so it's always the same point of view. In Le Soir newsroom there's no black, no Muslim people I don't think or maybe 1 not more, how would I speak in my newspaper or how would I be the*

> *voice of…I don't know… homeless…I saw this morning in the street or people in the suburbs of Brussels or Liège."* (Respondent 8, Le Soir, p. 12)

However, as argued, diversity in the newsroom isn't necessarily a guarantee for more pluralism. Next to the diversity in the newsroom, the organizational stance is also brought up as an influencing factor. The respondents agreed that this could differ for each media organization (of which some more specific than others) and that the journalist needs to adapt to the present 'framework', sometimes even still showing political traces, of which much depends on the editor in chief.

> *"I have a whole list of things that I'd still want to investigative but it hasn't happened yet since it didn't fit within the program and frame, having to be for the Eén audience and accessible for a lot of people and a bit of human interest and I find that ehm, yes that's the main reason why many things aren't covered and aren't possible."* (Respondent 18, VRT, p. 5)

> *"Yea, you can see it. On days like today you can see it. (…) Um…once again if you look at the accusations towards Unia of yesterday, if you read the editorial in De Morgen, that's a progressive point of view. Um…and it's not what it used to be, it used to be a very socialist point of view or a social democratic point of view but you can still see the difference between De Morgen and Het Laatste Nieuws, fortunately."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 9)

Furthermore, what seems very important on this hierarchal level is the professional autonomy within the newsroom, which on one hand seems to be influenced by the extent of interference and voice in discussion, and on the other hand by the budgetary elements, either restricting or allowing investigation. Within both aspects the type of editor in chief plays an important role, meaning the freedom felt could differ from organization to organization.

When it comes to interference and whether or not the journalist has a voice in discussions, results show a mixture of those who feel restricted interference and those who experience constructive interference. With the latter, the strengths of having discussion in the newsroom are highlighted. The personality of the journalist and trust one has earned shows its contribution hereby.

> *"No it's mostly that they wonder 'is this definitely news?' (…) 'What are you working on', 'isn't that too technical', 'it has to be about the people'…(…) Yes, it's not consciously saying ehm…'no we're not going to cover that', it's more that it has to teach something, it has to go fast, and then you don't always have the right circumstances created to do the work, but it's definitely not 'we're going to block that.'"* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, p. 9)

> *"But yes…it depends a bit on your persistence, my voice counts but that's because I'm so stubborn."* (laughs) (Luc Pauwels, VRT, p. 10)

With the first, in which restrictive interference by the editor in chief takes place, not offering any or much voice to the journalist, the editor in chief often takes the last word. This often leads to certain topics not being investigated or 'making the cut', which arguably is referred to as censorship.

> *"(…) And we wanted to make a sequel of it a year after (…). And Luc Rademakers stopped that. (…) and that was right before the municipal elections and he stopped that. So yes, in the case of Luc Rademakers you could say it was the dark middle ages for investigative journalism. And so I thik that it is structural here, seeing we don't have a tradition in it, that we don't have the mechanisms for it."* (Wim Van den Eynde, VRT, p. 3)

Lastly, and which came to light most frequently, the recent cutting of budget in the newsrooms caused by the economic crisis (Picard, 2014) leads to less investigation, as concluded in the above section. Hereby commercialism could restrict the journalist in topic choice, not only for daily news journalists but also for investigative journalists, who generally have been established to get more freedom than the first. Hereby, topics that are less attractive to the audience, such as for example climate change, are much less allowed to be investigated (respondent 2). Thus, this potentially leaves topics that investigative journalists are passionate about rejected by the editor in chief, due to the risk of investigation with time, money and no guarantee of result.

> *"I don't know…I think today investigative journalists have a more difficult task to convict…to convince that they are doing an important work and that it should be published and I don't think it's more difficult today, which I said in the beginning, is rather strange because investigative journalism should, nowadays, be the most important task for journalists and they are doing the opposite. It's not the fault of the journalist but the*

> *organization of which they work, their editors."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 8)

The result and potential solution offered by the respondents is to proceed in low budget creations, such as acquiring more mobile journalism skills, or to seek funding outside of the newsroom by platforms such as JournalismFund.eu or ICIJ. Though, finding resources is time consuming and challenging, while the funding of these platforms have shown to not work as efficiently financially as is ought to be.

> *"I don't see any business model in investigation that is really a success for the moment. ICIJ isn't a success. (…) Financially it's not. (…) As more and more people in Europe also understand that we have to work with funding, private funding, blablabla, it makes that in Europe too the funding at our disposal is shrinking, so we still have to find something that would be economically positive, that's it."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 12)

However, certain media organizations do offer enough opportunity and freedom to investigate, whereby it is argued that investigation earns more money, and that the media companies who don't invest in investigation are mistaken.

> *"There was a study from the European parliament a few years ago, which proves that investigative journalism can save money because if we can detect frauds then…, which is public money that has been spent in a bad way then we can teach the governments how to spend that money better or how to lower taxes because they don't have to spend the money anymore, so even for people who are very concerned about the money in their pockets, it should be investing in investigative journalism, there is not a question if you are left or right, there is not such thing as leftwing or rightwing investigative journalism."*(Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 3)

3.2.2.4. *Institutional factors and press freedom*

In order to grasp the factors influencing press freedom outside of the organization, questions were asked regarding experience and opinion with the legal protection of press freedom, the independence of media and how they experience attempting access to information.

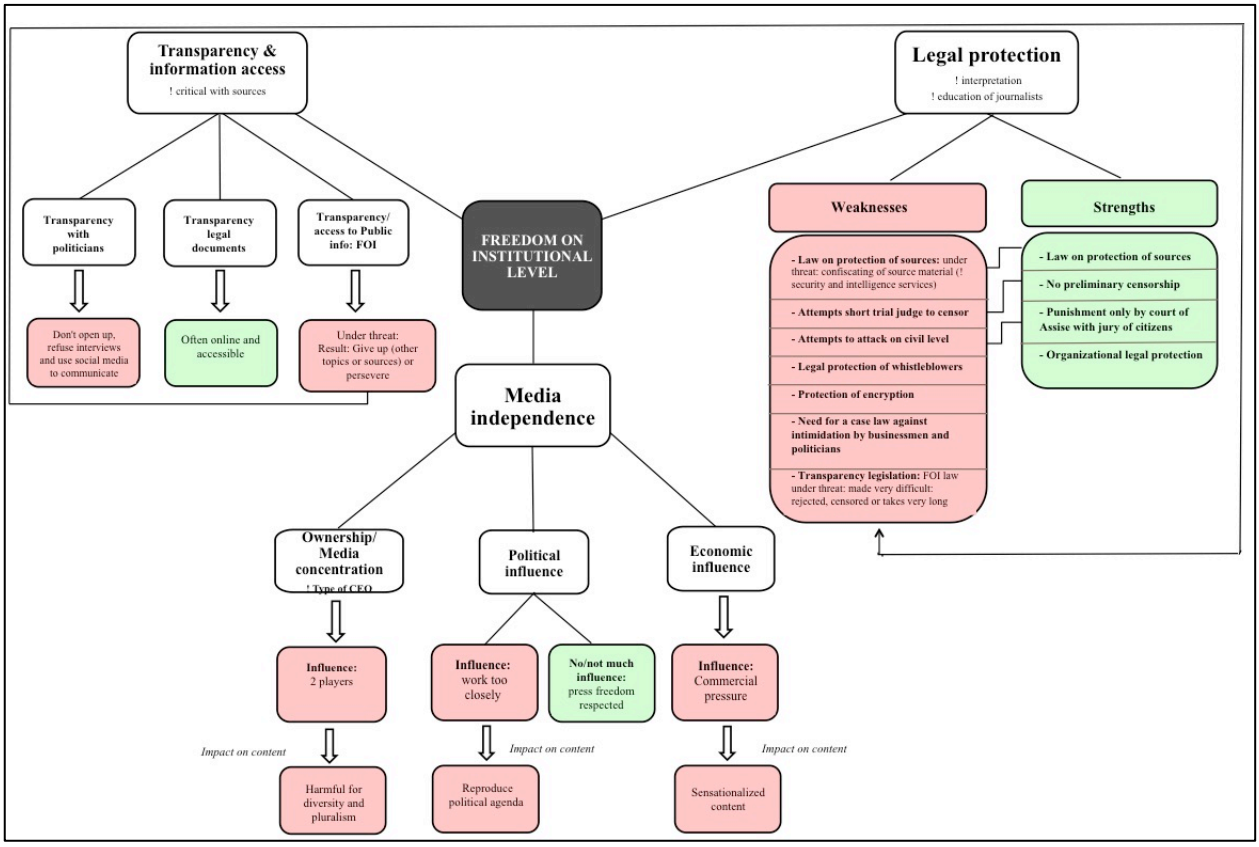

Figure 4: Coding diagram 4

As established in the literature overview, media independence is important in order to speak of a press free environment (RSF, 2016). When asking about how independent Western European media is perceived to be, results in first instance show that no platform escapes from economic influence. Such economic influence has a negative connotation, in the sense that it means that it leads to less focus on the quality of the content, as further outlined in section 3.2.2.2.

> *"There is press freedom but it's not 100%, it's limited commercially."*(Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 2)

> *"Economic dependence is definitely present. (…) But strictly speaking, there is no independent medium. (…) I don't think that ehm, there are many publishers who focus on, whether it's a magazine or no matter what, what the content entails. They look at the sales and the spread and the advertising revenue it generated. (…) If you don't have readers, don't have sales, then you also don't have journalism. And it's therefore that, ehm, there is such big commercial pressure in newsrooms, whereby they have to shrink and at the same time produce more.* (Respondent 3, Knack, p. 14-15)

Whether Western European media is independent from political influence shows mixed results. On one hand is thought that politicians don't have much influence on journalism and thus respect press freedom, though still criticizing and potentially threatening journalists.

> *"I actually think, as annoying as they might find it, that many politicians still say "yes, there is press freedom and yes, we won't be correct as politicians in a Western democracy if we, ehm, start attacking it. And yes we are going to give our criticism to the press and they will to us but that's the game". Then, as regards to scaring off journalists by powerful groups, that's of all times. You will always have that."* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, p. 12)

On the other hand is said that politicians use diverse techniques in order to play on the emotions of journalists, resulting in relationships that are suspected to be too close to stay critical. Though this closeness could also benefit journalists in getting information from politicians, journalists often potentially reproduce the political agenda too much or transfer from being a journalist to a politician too frequently. For the latter, this seems to count most for sports and political journalists.

> *"Yes, it's people you see on a daily basis, who you report about and then, of course they want to share their standpoint through the press (…) and the danger exists that you play along in a political game as a journalist and you have to be alert of that, that you're not manipulated to discredit someone else (…) it depends on your own ethics as a journalist, if you go along with it or not."* (Respondent 17, VTM, p. 10)
>
> *"In Belgium journalists are going to have lunch with politicians, they go to each others birthday parties, it's a small country, and journalists, a lot of journalists go to work for politicians, they work freelance for politicians, they write, they write speeches (…)."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 11)

Media independence also is influenced by ownership structures, whereby, in the Flemish case, two large players, namely Persgroep and Mediahuis, are in charge of most newspapers and magazines. Depending on the type of CEO, this is argued to be harmful for diversity and pluralism, possibly leading to too many of the same, paraphrased articles.

> *"I think it's crucial he, independence, ehm, once again the situation in Belgium is acceptable but less bright than 10 years ago, just because of the fact that several media that used to be independent titles now became part of big press groups and there are only 2 big press groups left. This is not good for the diversity of the media landscape, that is one thing, it is not like some Eastern European countries where the owners of the media are really dictating what should be or not, especially not be on the front page, but ehm, the landscape is less diverse, at least as far as mainstream, the classic mainstream media are concerned."*(Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 10)
>
> *"Media ownership is a threat for freedom of speech and for press freedom really. (…) It's a real issue, more than ever."* (Ides Debruyne, Journalismfund.eu, p. 12)
>
> *"That's not a good thing. Um…I'm sure that…um…the CEO's of these companies are quite open minded but it is very well possible that one day they will be replaced by 'Rupert Murdoch' kind of people and what would happen then is that press is directly influenced by the ideas…by the ideology of their bosses. So, that's an issue."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 9)

Next to independence, a good legal protection is important for the freedom of journalists. There is no doubt that this is present and recognized in Belgium, as the respondents point towards a strong constitution with no systematic problems.

> *"First of all, we have a very strong constitutional protect in Belgium both on freedom of expression and specifically an article with press freedom contains some very crucial elements which make it very difficult for the authorities to interfere, there can't be no prior censorship in Belgium. (…)We don't have journalists in jail, we don't have journalists being assassinated in Belgium so the general answer it's a pretty good legal climate and as I said first of all constitutional and secondly of course Belgium is a member of the European Convention of Human Rights and I think the last 10-15 years progressively we have integrated better and better the standards of the European Court of Human Rights."* (Dirk Voorhoof, Human Rights Center, p. 1)

Despite the strength of not allowing preliminary censorship, there are still attempts to censor a priori through a short trial judge. Hereby the chances of it happening are very low due to the strong protection, though, however, the procedure is very costly.

> *"(…) I also notice that if people disagree with the content of an article or broadcast that they try to turn to the short trial judge to forbid the broadcast. (…) The procedure is expensive, you need a lawyer, but eventually it'll still be broadcasted."* (Respondent 17, VTM, p. 9)

Another strength strongly highlighted regarding the legal protection of press freedom is the law on protection of sources, forming a groundbreaking law and a strong example for other countries. However, this law isn't limitless and is recently claimed to be under threat, as journalists report cases of confiscating of source material, thus not fully respecting the law.

> *"We cannot be forced to reveal our sources, they cannot even ask us who our sources are, only when there is a terrorist threat or something like that (…) uhm, but still we are protected, but that doesn't mean that there were, there are still cases every year of journalists having their iPhone confiscated, having at home prosecutions, searches at home... which is prohibited but they do it, and uhm, so the judicial system is not really working with us on that (…). Uhm, I know we are being followed sometimes by maybe private investigators, I don't know but it happens. And some of my colleagues are intimidated (…). But the law, I think in Belgium is a good law, but it should be, uhm, it's, it's becoming more and more sloppy, there were also, in the new, the new antiterrorist laws, there was this uhm, attempt by mr. Geens to uhm, make it possible to hack the phones of journalists. That was taken out, but we saw in Gent that it still happens so, uhm two months ago it still happened for a lousy, stupid, conflict between, between a member of the council and one of his colleagues, so it wasn't even an affair of the state, it was a very vigor negotiator."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 10)
>
> *"We have also a specific legislation on security and intelligence services and that law created some possibilities which do not fully guarantee the general, generic principals in the law of 2005 so that can be an issue for journalists who are working in the anti-terror and intelligence and security atmosphere."* (Dirk Voorhoof, Human Rights Center, p. 2)

The protection of journalistic sources goes hand in hand with the legal protection of whistleblowers, making important sources for investigative journalists. Also hereby, the legal framework could improve. Furthermore, to

optimize source protection, despite it's downfalls, also calls for further legal protection of encryption.

> *"Yes, eh, so, concerning the laws we have two issues. I would say no there's different issues but there are two issues that are really important today. The first one is the protection of the whistleblowers, so whistleblowers are not a part of the press but in order to have a free press you need to have protection of whistleblowers. It is still something that needs to improve legally speaking. And it shouldn't be improved at the level of Belgium; it should be improved at the level of Europe. So I'd say that for me my true priority is, another point is encryption. If you want to protect your whistleblowers you must have a good law and you must have a good encryption. Both. Legal protection, technical protection."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 6)

When journalists do get called out for reporting on matters, there is not only usually a protectional structure on organizational level, but strength also shows within the legal framework, whereby it is only possible through the court of Assise with a jury of citizens, thus making it difficult to interfere with their work. However, also this isn't limitless, as, because of this, there are attempts to attack on civil level, in which the journalist is seen as any other potential criminal.

> *"Journalists in Belgium are only to be punished by a court of Assise, which is a very, very big procedure, but you have to have a jury, a jury of citizens and normally it doesn't happen that's why they try other ways to attack the journalists and that's the problem. They attack them on the principle of due diligence. If a journalist has been sloppy or hasn't followed procedures then he is punishable like every citizen, if a plumber doesn't do his job, or an electrician, and there is an accident, and that's, that's on the civil level, that's not on the, on the straf rechterlijk level. But still, many journalists are attacked, we were attacked with Apache through that way, they are asking 350.000€ from us, which is a catastrophe, which would be a catastrophe, but on the other hand, the problem is that the cost for legal assistants for journalists is very, for everybody, every citizen, is very high."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 10)

The respondents hereby also call out for more legal responsibility against intimidation by businessmen and politicians in order to stimulate free investigative journalism.

Lastly, and very frequently highlighted, is the lack of efficiency in the enforcement of the FOI legislation. Though the legislation promises transparency for journalists, respondents claim that the theory and practice are drifting further apart. It is thus known to be made very difficult for journalists to access public documents, by on one hand either being rejected transparency, taking long periods of time to be dealt with, or to be handed with censorship. Furthermore, to prevent rejection, more needs to be in hands of the federal commission, as they are more independent than the general commission, belonging to the government. Through this, journalists often end up not trying or giving up by seeking other sources or topics. Hereby, journalists themselves are also critiqued in the sense of not being educated on the legal opportunities, and not taking enough action.

> *"My experience is that over the last 20 years working in this area that not many journalists first of all know the law and if they know it they don't use it they try to get information in another way and that might have to do with the fact that it takes quite long before you get your documents and if you don't get them…the procedures, the appeal procedures do not guarantee sufficient, speedy reaction and if you still at that level…don't win your case…you have to take up your case to the High Administrative Court, le conseil d'etat, which can only annul the refusal so there are big insufficiencies in the enforcement of the law especially for investigative journalists."* (Dirk Voorhoof, Human Rights Center, p. 3)

However, legal trouble is also argued to be normal to a certain extent for checks and balances. The fact that the law is subject to (unintentional) interpretation issues may be inevitable. What also can be questioned here, is to what extent legal improvement is even possible, seeing the strong legal base in this strategic location.

Besides the enforcement issue regarding the transparency legislation, journalists seem to also have difficulties regarding getting information from politicians. This, due to the fact that they on one hand frequently don't open up in interviews, and on the other hand often refuse interviews due to the fact that they are no longer dependent on the press to spread their political agenda since the emergence of social media, potentially being problematic for the informing of citizens, having to depend on political propaganda.

> *“And also these politicians are, we as Apache, we, we go to interview politicians when we feel like it. We say, ‘I would like to interview this guy on this topic’. And nine out of ten times they refuse. Because they know that we will ask questions they don't want to answer...(...) ...and the other newspapers you have politicians, they have their new plan, when they have something to, to, to say to the world uhm, more and more politicians don't use that any more, they just put it on Twitter as well…they don't need these newspapers any more...”* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 12)

However, also here is important to point out that, especially since increasing digitalization, more information is available than ever for journalists to access, though criticalness hereby is a must.

3.2.2.5. *Ideological factors and press freedom*

In order to comprehend how press freedom is affected by ideological factors in Western Europe, respondents were asked about the impact of political correctness on journalism, the presence of dominant ideologies, the challenging of it and the presence of journalism as a watchdog.

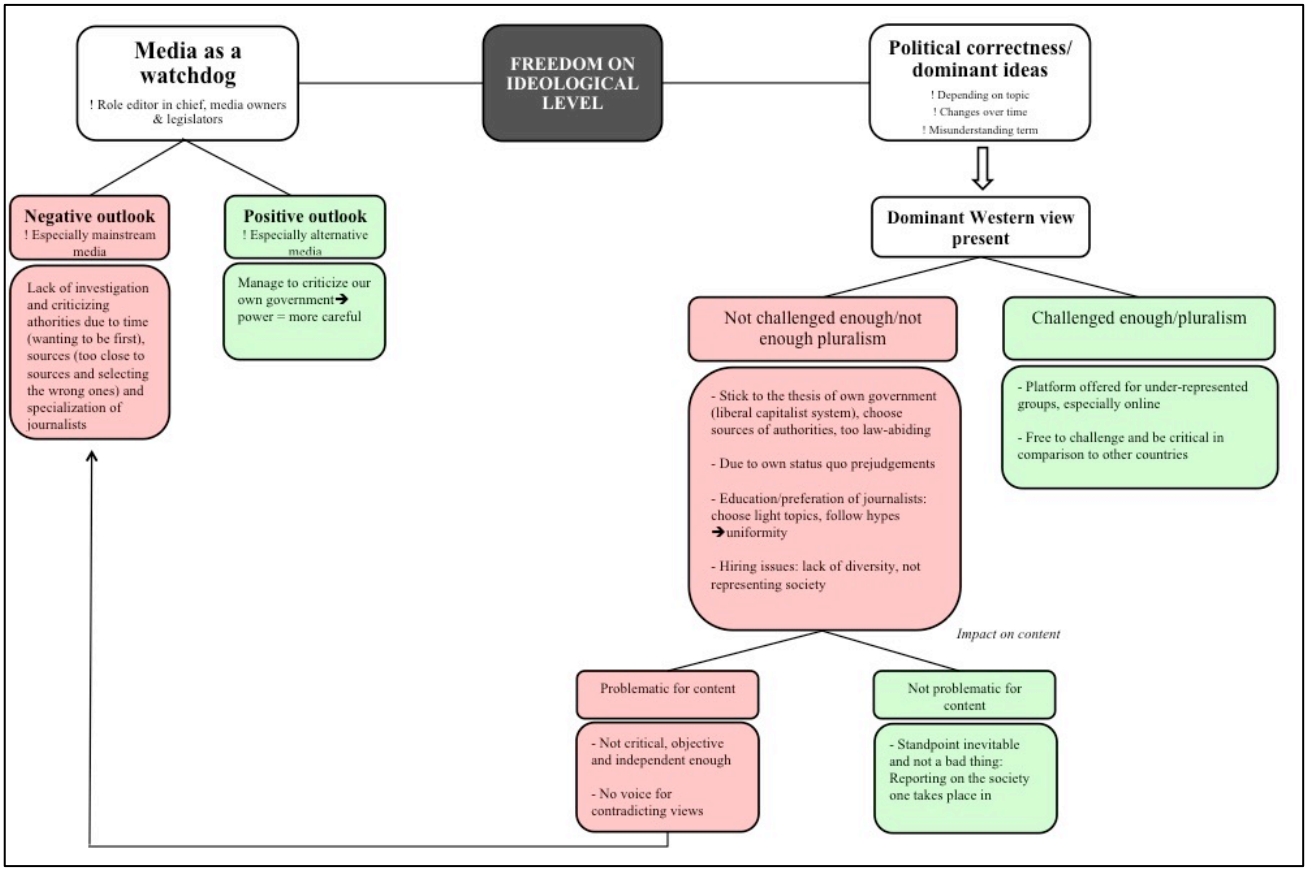

Figure 5: Coding diagram 5

In first instance, discussion about the exact meaning of the term 'political correctness' seems to take place, arguing it is often misused or misunderstood.

> *"Well it depends on how you define political correctness…because there's... (...) Well, of course I'm in favor of correctness, which should be the main goal of everything a journalist does in his daily situation. Um…but the term 'political correctness' is abused, misused these days by…mostly by right winged people. (…) On the other hand, political correctness could lead to status quo like you said and…well a society that strives for status quo is also a society I don't like because nothing happens. There are always things that should be correct in a society, so if that's your definition of political correctness, then I am opposed to it.*

> *But I think that…um…it's a difficult term nowadays, because if you discuss this with ten people, you will have ten different points of views."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 10)

Furthermore, it becomes very clear and confirmed that there is a dominant Western view present throughout this strategic region, which seems to have a visible impact on journalism. Such dominant views don't only become visible depending on the topic, but also change over time.

> *"Of course our views are very much colored by our economical and political…geo political situation. And I have discovered that very strong, I travel quite a lot. So when I look at the news in Scandinavia, I get another view of some things than when I look in Belgium (…). And we are not sufficiently aware we are looking at it through some glasses. So in that terms, I think that is inevitable to some degree but we should be aware…yea. And that's…I think that's so important to have now and then an international perspective."* (Dirk Voorhoof, Human Rights Center, p. 12)

The question here is whether dominant politically correct ideas are challenged enough, thus, often drifting out to be a discussion on the extent of pluralism available in the Western European press. Results hereby are mixed. On one hand respondents argue that the presence of dominant views come with enough freedom to be challenged and thus doesn't form a big issue. Hereby is argued that there is a freedom for journalists to have critical views, especially in comparison to other countries and that there are enough platforms offered to represent less popular ideas, especially with the opportunities the online environment brings about.

> *"Globally speaking I think the Belgian press, the Western press brings out a fairly pluralistic image of society. Ehm, you have what I mentioned earlier a type of correction with social media. Some groups that maybe don't get voiced that easily in mainstream media often find a way to get heard through social media (…). Ehm, but globally speaking I think that we are fairly pluralistic, free and broad minded."* (Dirk Leestmans, VRT, p. 13)

On the other hand and boldly emphasized, it is argued that such dominant politically correct ideas are not challenged enough, which could be harmful for pluralism. Hereby, the results show that too often journalists stick to the thesis

of their own government, show issues of information gathering by using sources of authorities, and overall are ought to be too law-abiding. Thus, journalists may not have the courage to go against such mainstream ideas.

> *"It's hard to put your finger on what is 'the' dominant idea but eh, but this definitely is there in the mainstream media and once again I can testify about it cause I work for a non mainstream media and then it was sometimes hard to eh… to get those kind of ideas and stories being picked up."*(Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 12)
>
> *"There is just a lack of courage, too law-abiding, but that's present within lot's of companies. And I find that, I think that, yes I don't know, I don't have a solution for it."* (Doulas De Coninck, De Morgen, p. 16)
>
> *"Most media owners and most journalists are in a type of "yes, that is what has been officially said so we're going with it. (…) Like a type of authority that is placed above whereby one is subordinate while journalism means the opposite, they have to go against authorities."* (Doulas De Coninck, De Morgen, p. 8)

By sticking to ideas of the present status quo, journalists hereby also seem to have prejudgments for specific topics, which is extra highlighted in times of conflict, thus not offering an objective outlook.

> *"We strongly investigate when it comes about money, but when it comes to political issues, complex political issues like the one in Syria (…). We tend to perfectly validate the thesis of our own government, that's it."* (Alain Lallemand, Le Soir, p. 9)
>
> *"Either way it's very difficult, and many aspects of Turkey, I think that there are also good things happening, but we are focused on the referendum, on the presidential power of Erdogan, why? Because there is a lot of press freedom here. Because there are checks and balances here, because nobody can get the absolute power here since we work in coalition."* (Respondent 7, Knack, p. 14)
>
> *"But there's a general acceptance maybe a culture because of being a western news media outlet that we have kind of ah…prejudgment on Russian media outlets and maybe this has to be…maybe that journalist have to be careful with that more."* (Majd Khalifeh, VRT, p. 9)

Furthermore, political correctness in Western Europe is also argued to be bottom up. Thus, the educational backgrounds and preferences of journalists themselves tend to impact this lack of challenging dominant ideas. Seemingly,

journalists often aren't educated enough, thus not knowing better than sticking to mainstream ideas. In general, journalists also tend to prefer entertainment over critical topics and hereby tend to follow hypes, leading to overall uniformity.

> *"Many young journalists aren't intellectually strong enough, and that's not asked from them anymore, there is too much time pressure, they don't have time to read, they no longer have time to work on many things, and so, yea, then you will float along with the mainstream ideas more.* (Respondent 12, freelancer, p. 9)
>
> *"It's all entertainment, it's not critical reporting any more. But, uhm, because of all these titles disappearing you have much less voices and you have much less subjects being treated and I hope that initiatives like ours, small scale would become viable in this internet age and I think it will (…)."* (Karl Van den Broeck, Apache, p. 16)
>
> *"What bothers me a bit is that you start seeing a lot of uniformity since everyone is a bit in the same liberal capitalistic system here, which is a good system, but a few people also need to sometimes say "hey, wait, we have some hesitation with that."* (Luc Pauwels, VRT, p. 15)

Lastly, as brought up in section 3.2.2.3., also the diversity in the newsroom tends to impact the notion of political correctness and overall pluralism, as most journalists are white, male and belong to the middle class, thus, not representing society properly.

> *"So I think even if we think we really understand the conflict, yea we understand it, but as white, Western, middle class people so I think it's really important that we mix a lot, that we have journalists from all kinds of backgrounds and maybe (…)"* (Respondent 13, VRT, 7)

In one sense not challenging dominant ideas enough isn't seen as problematic due to it being inevitable. Journalists will, in this belief, automatically report on the society in which they are living in, whereby having a standpoint isn't necessarily a setback for the content outcome.

> *"Partly you're always working from a specific social position of which you can't deny, which doesn't mean you can't strive to be truthful (…) but as a journalist you are part of a society that stands for something. (…) As a journalist you also have to dare to take a standpoint."* (Dirk Leestmans, VRT, p. 12)

But on the other hand, and most boldly highlighted, this is seen as a big problem in informing the public, as the above leads to a lack of critical, objective and independent journalism, in which contradicting views aren't voiced enough. The fact that titles are disappearing doesn't help hereby, possibly making quality journalism a niche.

This points in the direction of media as a watchdog, in which being critical over power positions is a central given. Whether or not Western European press fulfills it's role as a watchdog, is in first instance influenced by the role of the editor in chief, the media owners and legislators.

> *"it's a challenge for themselves and for the editor-in-chief, for the owners of the media, for the public broadcaster, for the legislator, for the judiciary…all together need to take steps to promote this enabling environment that we become aware that investigative journalism's public watchdog function of media, is so crucial for our democracies that in the future we don't have politicians that can mislead the population." (*Dirk Voorhoof, Human Rights Center, p. 14)

On one hand, results show that Western European media don't fulfill their role as a watchdog, arguing that the press doesn't dig deep enough, doesn't succeed to reveal enough and hereby isn't critical enough of those in power. Supposedly, this is due to time and budgetary restrictions, whereby journalists want to beat competition by being first, due to their source choices, often being those of authorities, due to being too close with their sources and lastly the specialization of journalists.

> *"I find dat there is still too little, ehm, too little revealing of elements. (…) Because the watchdog function, ehm, still seems underrated (…) Everyone has to be able to write about everything nowadays. Report about everything. So time to specialize. (…) There is no time and people and means for it.* (Respondent 3, Knack, p. 19)
>
> *"It's difficult for journalists for political or sportive or economical newsrooms to be watchdogs because they are too close to their sources. So the newsrooms need investigative journalists that are apart, okay, so I think in Belgium, eh, I think we have not enough watchdogs. (…) I think it's a problem of money."* (Respondent 8, Le Soir, p. 13)

However, journalists and experts in the field are also hopeful as comes to the watchdog role of journalism. Those with a positive outlook emphasize that there are some very strong examples in this strategic location, especially within the alternative media frame, in which criticizing the government has been a success. Arguably, this is also why those in power positions are more careful as regards to being criticized by the press.

> *"Every now and then you see, you see good examples, so I'm quite positive. Once again maybe on 3000 journalists in Flanders not everyone is doing every day the classical watchdog of democracy role, but every now and then you see examples and then you think "okay, this is what journalism is about, so, so about that I'm quite hopeful and positive."* (Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 14)

Conclusion empirical overview

To conclude, the strengths of press freedom are well recognized by the respondents.

> *"If you compare us to other difficult countries like Russia or Saudi Arabia, we are free as a bird. If you look at United States right now and what's happen with the new President, we consider ourselves lucky that we're living in Belgium although our situation is not perfect but it's close to perfection compared to other countries."* (Frank Van Laeken, freelancer, p. 2)

Though, in relation, the focus on the restrictions is stronger, as outlined in the limitations section, potentially to place the spotlight on improving the overall situation. Moreover, one can say that the restrictions to press freedom are well thought about at these times by investigative journalists and experts due to recent occurrences, not guaranteeing a press free future. This makes that respondents are well aware that the nature of press freedom could change over time, and vigilance about it is needed at all times.

> *"We live in a heaven for investigative journalism but threats are just around the corner and you really feel them coming, especially in the last years."* (Kristof Clerix, Knack, p. 9) *"Press freedom is not something that is chopped in a rock, something that is there, and once it's there it will stay there. No, it's something you have to defend every day. It's very vulnerable and this is something we should talk more about, that press*

> *freedom is something you have to fight for every day."* (Ides Debruyne, Journalismfund.eu, p. 16)

Despite the strong protection in Belgium, investigative journalists also struggle with safety matters depending on the sensitivity of the topic and the amount of organizational protection, due to several forms of non-physical threat, often being economic. Thus, the freedom experienced could differ amongst organizations according to the priorities and roles of the editor in chief as well as owners, creating a need for the journalist to adapt to its frame. Furthermore, another observation includes that many restrictions are a result of monetary aspects, calling it a 'commercial type of press freedom' and being bolder in such times of economic crisis. This shows through strict time restrictions in the newsroom leading to a lack of fact checking, a distorted source choice and overall covering, news values set up for competition, a lack of budget to proceed in investigation and thus, hereby, impacting journalisms ability to fulfill its role as a watchdog. This, although the carefulness of power positions indicate freedom for journalists to criticize them. Hereby, investigative journalists often go outside of the newsroom to set up their investigations in their spear time. Though, such recent changes also have its positive sides, with more information being available, offering more power and opportunity for the audience, whereby the under-represented can also be heard and critical. Legally, protectional aspects are extremely strong 'theoretically', allowing journalists a tremendous amount of freedom through, however, in practice it knows its limitations and shortcomings in the enforcement of it, often to do with interpretation factors. Further restrictions revolve around strong political influence, ownership structures and transparency, diversity and pluralism issues through political correctness. Many of such restrictions lead to censorship, not covering certain topics and thus not informing the audience correctly, though the audience itself also plays a role hereby. However, this does not take away that that the journalists themselves could play a role, not allowing the blame to solely be on the restrictions in the field.

Lastly, and as an alternative view, one can ask to what extent and whether press freedom is *supposed* to be limitless.

> *"The only thing what I was thinking before you came was like, ehm, is press freedom always being able to say 'everything', because it has also a dark side. If you say then maybe also with people with very strange opinions should have freedom to say them and that's a ethical question, hè. (…)So where's the line and who decides what the line is?"* (Respondent 13, VRT, p. 10)

3.3. LIMITATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative research method in general knows its shortcomings as regards to its quantitative partners. Its criticism often derives from not fulfilling the general quality requirements. However, this results in a separate range of quality requirements within qualitative branch (Mortelmans, 2013), of which briefly listed below, including an evaluation on each level specifically for this research.

Firstly, the ***credibility*** in qualitative research can be examined. Hereby, one questions if the interpretations made by the researcher match the collected data and thus to what extent they are credible. Ways to optimize the research credibility is by generating *depth within the data gathering* process, by proceeding in various forms of *triangulation* (being data, researcher, theoretical and methodological), by doing a *member check* and by *seeking negative evidence* (Mortelmans, 2013).

- First off, the individual choices made in this qualitative research are subjective, inevitably influencing the overall credibility of this work. Further, within this research an average of one hour was taken for each interview, in which was aimed to dig deeper in brought up issues or strengths by asking further questions. However, this research is very open and as press freedom could be influenced by many factors it thus becomes extremely broad and at times challenging to be detailed on each aspect.
- Furthermore, data triangulation is optimized in this research by not only gathering information from documents and scientific articles, but also by proceeding in interviews. However, research and methodological triangulation aren't achieved, as this research is limited to just one single researcher and research method due to time and framework constraints. Furthermore, a member check was ought to be achieved by involving several people, not related to the research topic, to give the results a brief and critical overview, leading to further inspiration to optimize specific findings, which hereby also expanded the theoretical triangulation. Lastly, by examining the raw interview data, negative

evidence for certain findings were strived to be detected and formulated, though, as noticed in the research results, the focus appeared to frequently be on the aspects that influence press freedom negatively, potentially to place the spotlight on improving the overall situation.

Secondly, ***transferability*** is to be achieved, not in the quantitative manner whereby conclusions can be representative for the entire population, but through *inferential* (through thick description) and *theoretical generalizability* (Mortelmans, 2013).

- By a detailed description of the research data and theory through thick description, the findings of this research should, in theory, be applicable to other contexts and should transcend the individual researched case (Mortelmans, 2013).

Furthermore, ***dependability*** shows its importance, divided in *internal reliability*, referring to the ability to access and check the basic research material and *external reliability*, referring to the examination of whether social change is the result of actual social change or by methodological and analytical error, which can be optimized by proceeding in self-reflection (sharing one's view as a researcher), as well as audit trail (offering the reader a clear and detailed reporting of the research process) (Mortelmans, 2013).

- Within this research the dependability is ought to be highest, seeing the available access to raw data and other research material on one hand, and an outlined description of methodological decisions on the other hand. However, the correctness of each methodological decision can't be fully guaranteed, due to the research being proceeded by just one person's decisions and ideas.

In-depth interviews as a research method itself also knows its limits, on one hand through the social desirability of the respondents (Mortelmans, 2013), of which inevitably played a role in the research outcome of this thesis seeing the sensitivity of certain questions and on the other hand through the perception of the respondents (Mortelmans, 2013), of which is highly

subjective and doesn't necessarily project reality. To broaden the results, non-investigative journalists who are experts in the field were included in the research.

Lastly and adding on to the above stated limitations, to stimulate improvement in further research within this branch, on one hand it may be useful to proceed in observations as a research method to overcome the social desirability and shortcomings in the perception of the respondents. On the other hand it may be interesting to use this research as a potential base for further quantitative research, to hereby be able to make representative conclusions for the Belgian press freedom situation.

4. Conclusion

To help provide a clear answer to the main research question, namely <<*to what extent do Belgian investigative journalists perceive the media as 'free'?*>> two sub-questions were identified, being:

- In which ways is press freedom in Western Europe restricted according to investigative journalists?
- In which ways is press freedom in Western Europe at strength according to investigative journalists?

Through a combination of analyzing objective documents, scientific work and 19 subjective in-depth interviews specific findings were achieved, of which, due to the broadness of this research, were structured using the *hierarchy of influences* theory developed by Reese (2007). Thus, split in five different levels, being the individual level, level of routines, organizational level, institutional level and ideological level (Reese, 2007).

Findings of the literature overview, including the conceptual framework assessing those elements that impact press freedom hereby formed a strong base in order to proceed with the empirical overview, whereby the results of the latter form a detailed extension of it. Generally, though the strengths of Western European press freedom are undeniably recognized by investigative journalists and experts, the restrictions continuously are emphasized. This, potentially to demonstrate the need for further improvements and not feeling like a press free future is guaranteed due to recent occurrences.

To answer the first sub-question, assessing the ways in which Western European press freedom is restricted, one can say that on the <<individual level>> of the journalist there are **safety issues**, often depending on the nature of the topic, the amount of people working on the topic, the extent of organizational protection, the country and media company size. Such risk of safety is firstly caused by, and boldly highlighted *economic threat*, as well as *threat by powerful people*, *legal threat* and *terrorism threat* (balancing

protecting and informing citizens). In the case of being sued, journalists usually win the case, though the procedures are extremely costly, thus forming a threat either way. The amount of fear felt due to threat depends on the personality of the journalist. Nonetheless, awareness, carefulness, hesitation, such as extra fact checking, not disclosing information about one's private life, not mentioning certain details or avoiding certain topics appear to be its result, thus pointing towards self-censorship. Furthermore, **individual bias** is not left out of the question as an inevitable given, either as something that shouldn't be accepted, or as something that asks for transparency.

Freedom restricted through <<journalistic routines>> often derive from the recent economic crisis in journalism, on one hand being **time pressure,** counting mostly for daily news journalists, on the other leading to a **lack of freedom to proceed in investigation**. The strong competition with other players this brings about in the online environment also impacts the **news values** in the newsroom, through *poorly selecting topics* the audience 'wants' instead of 'needs' and potentially leading to various topics never 'making the cut'. Additionally, the **information gathering process** on one hand is **limited** due to general inconvenience with sources, and on the other hand due to routinely selecting sources of authorities without being critical on them. All of this is said to lead to less fact checking, copy-paste journalism and overall laziness. Hereby there is less trust in journalism and a potentially less informed audience, though the laziness of the audience itself also plays a role.

Further constraints within the <<organization>> leading to censorship and certain topics not being published include the **lack of diversity** in the newsroom due to the same profiles continuously being hired, a **partisan organizational stance**, differing for each platform, whereby there is a need for journalists to fit in each organizations 'frame' and lastly, the **harming of professional autonomy**. This, on one hand through *restrictive interference* by the editor in chief and on the other hand through *budgetary restrictions*, thus harming the freedom of the journalist. Solutions mentioned for the latter is practicing low budget creations or seeking funding opportunity outside of the newsroom, of which seems to frequently be the result.

<<Outside of the organization>>, a **lack of transparency** regarding information access could be harmful for the journalists' freedom, which seems to be the case due to a *lack of transparency with politicians*, who generally don't open up or refuse interviews and a *lack of transparency with public information* through the FOI legislation, of which the enforcement is lacking tremendously according to the respondents. Further **legal limitations** harming the freedom of journalists include the *confiscating of source material, attempts to preliminary censorship*, the *inefficient protection of whistleblowers* and *encryption technologies* and the *absence of a case law against intimidation by businessmen and politicians*. Moreover, also a **lack of media independence** is claimed to be present and harmful for press freedom, firstly through *political influence*, whereby politicians attempt to manipulate journalists to create relationships and reproduce the political agenda, secondly through *ownership structures*, harming diversity and pluralism to the presence of just two players, and lastly, through *economic influence*, leading to sensationalized content.

<<Ideologically>>, the journalist's freedom could be harmed through the **presence of dominant ideas on political correctness**, leading to a *lack of pluralism*, whereby it becomes daring for journalists to deviate from it. Such dominant ideas show in Western European press by sticking to the thesis of one's own government and being too law-abiding, by prejudging alternative elements, by the lack of proper education of journalists resulting in a tendency to follow hypes and create uniformity and lastly, by hiring issues, whereby the newsroom does not represent society. This generally is perceived to have a problematic impact on the final content, bringing to light the topic of **media as a watchdog**. The latter could be threatened due to the *absence of the means* for journalists to be able to proceed in critical investigation, being time constraints, source errors and the lack of specialization of journalists.

On the other hand, to answer the second sub-question formulated, on <<individual level>> the Western European press freedom also knows its **safety strengths** due to its *strong protectional framework*, *excluding forms of physical threat* and thus, again, depending on the circumstances, allow free reporting without self-censorship.

Furthermore, on the <<level of routines>>, **enough time** is offered for the few investigative journalists that are left to proceed in their work. Despite the criticism caused by recent changes in the journalism landscape, it also knows its positive sides to journalism, such as a more critical, powerful audience with more opportunity, more information and media companies that manage to correct one another.

<<Organizationally>>, further freedom could be experienced when the newsroom is **diverse enough**, has a **neutral stance** and **respects professional autonomy** by offering *constructive interference* and a proper budget and thus *freedom for investigation.*

On <<institutional level>>, the Western European press also knows it's **legal strengths**, being first of all its strong constitution, the *law on protection of sources*, the *ban on preliminary censorship*, the punishment of journalists only being possible by the *court of Assise with a jury of citizens* and further *protections arranged on organizational level*, offering journalists safety to investigate what they want. Regarding **information transparency**, strength shows in the *availability of many (legal) documents online*, whereas **media independence** could be at strength through *politicians respecting press freedom* and thus not trying to influence journalists.

Lastly, <<ideologically>>, the fact that power positions are careful indicates that journalists do have the *freedom to criticize their own governments*, which thus allows the means for **media to be a watchdog.** Despite the presence of **dominant Western ideas**, *pluralism isn't necessarily harmed*, as the needed space is available to represent alternative ideas and as there is freedom to challenge and be critical. Though, for those who do assume dominant ideas aren't challenged enough, taking a standpoint according to the society the journalist takes place in is perceived as inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing.

To answer the main research question, namely to what extent Belgian investigative journalists perceive the media as 'free', in first instance one can say that there is a realization of being lucky to be receiving the freedom and protection present within this geographic region. Press freedom in Western Europe generally knows its strong legal framework and societal norms and

values. Though, however, there are several alarming elements. Recent cases provide investigative journalists and experts with many questions regarding the future of press freedom. Apart from those elements that are in hands of the journalists themselves, the 'theoretically' strong legal framework and norms occasionally don't align with the enforcement of them. In first instance, the freedom experienced could differ amongst media organizations, depending on the role of the editor in chief and media owner. What seems to be remarkable here, is that many freedom restrictions are caused by monetary elements, all of which become significant during times of the frequently talked about economic crisis, not only through time restrictions, but also through dominant news values making freedom for investigation limited and hereby knowing its impact on media as a watchdog, thus making it a commercial type of freedom. Further present restrictions include threat (often economic), political influence, legal elements and transparency and pluralism issues through political correctness. Such restrictions are claimed to lead to various forms of (self-)censorship of which know its consequences on the quality of the content outcome in democratic society. Hence why such matters should be looked at closely and why constant vigilance of the press freedom situation is needed.

Consequently, most of the discovered strengths and weaknesses derive from subjective views from investigative journalists whereby social desirability may leave its traces, which is why future research may benefit from using methods such as observation. Due to the broadness of this study, it could form a base to proceed in further, potentially quantitative research on issues individually, which could be useful to take action in improving the press freedom situation in Western Europe.

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6. Appendices

APPENDIX 1: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS TOPIC LIST…….. See CD-ROM

APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENTS…….. See CD-ROM

APPENDIX 3: DROP OFF INFORMATION…….. See CD-ROM

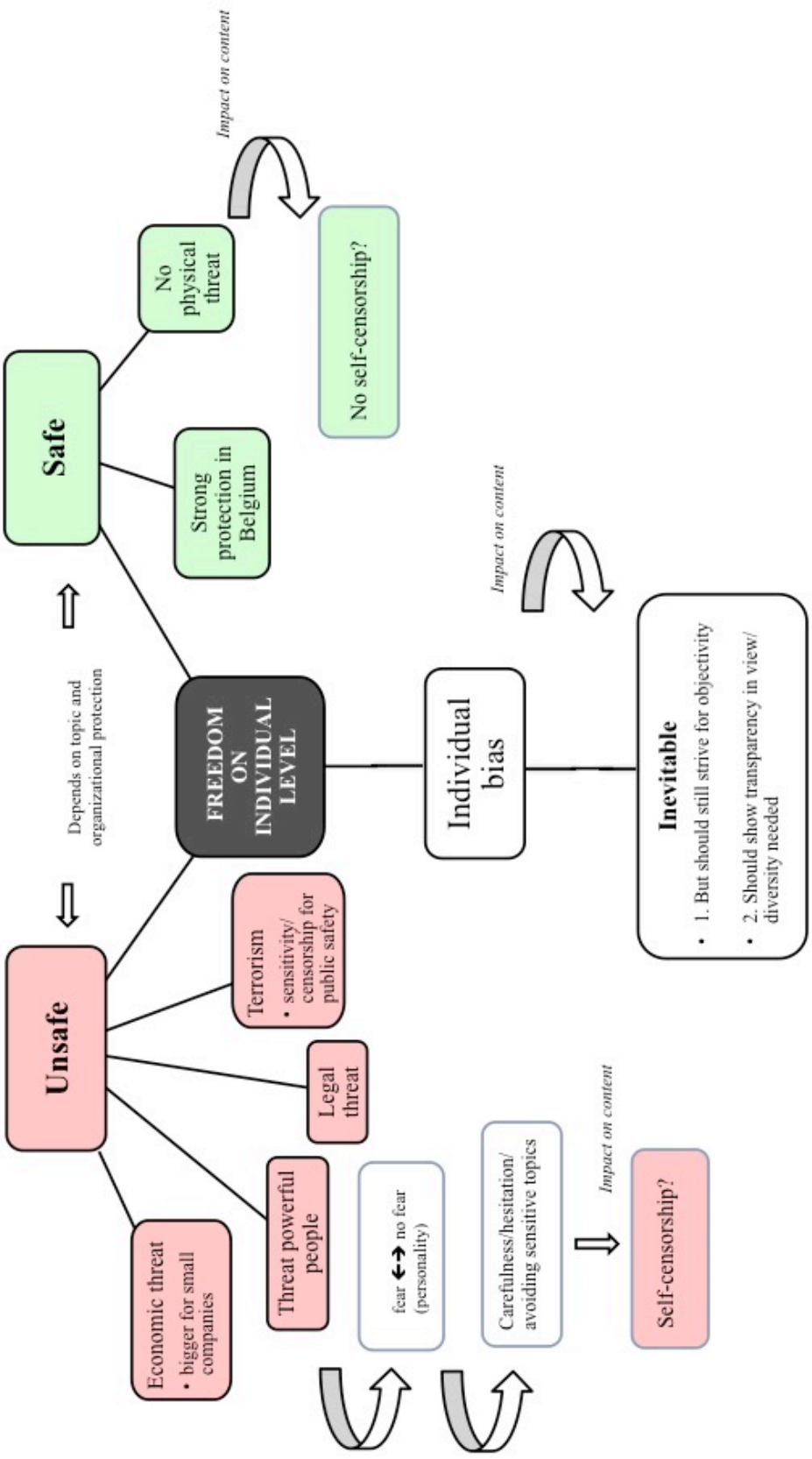
APPENDIX 4: TRANSCRIPTIONS IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS…….. See CD-ROM

APPENDIX 5: AUDIO FILES…….. See CD-ROM

APPENDIX 6: DATA ANALYSIS CODING …….. See CD-ROM

APPENDIX 7: CODING DIAGRAMS……91

Coding diagram 1



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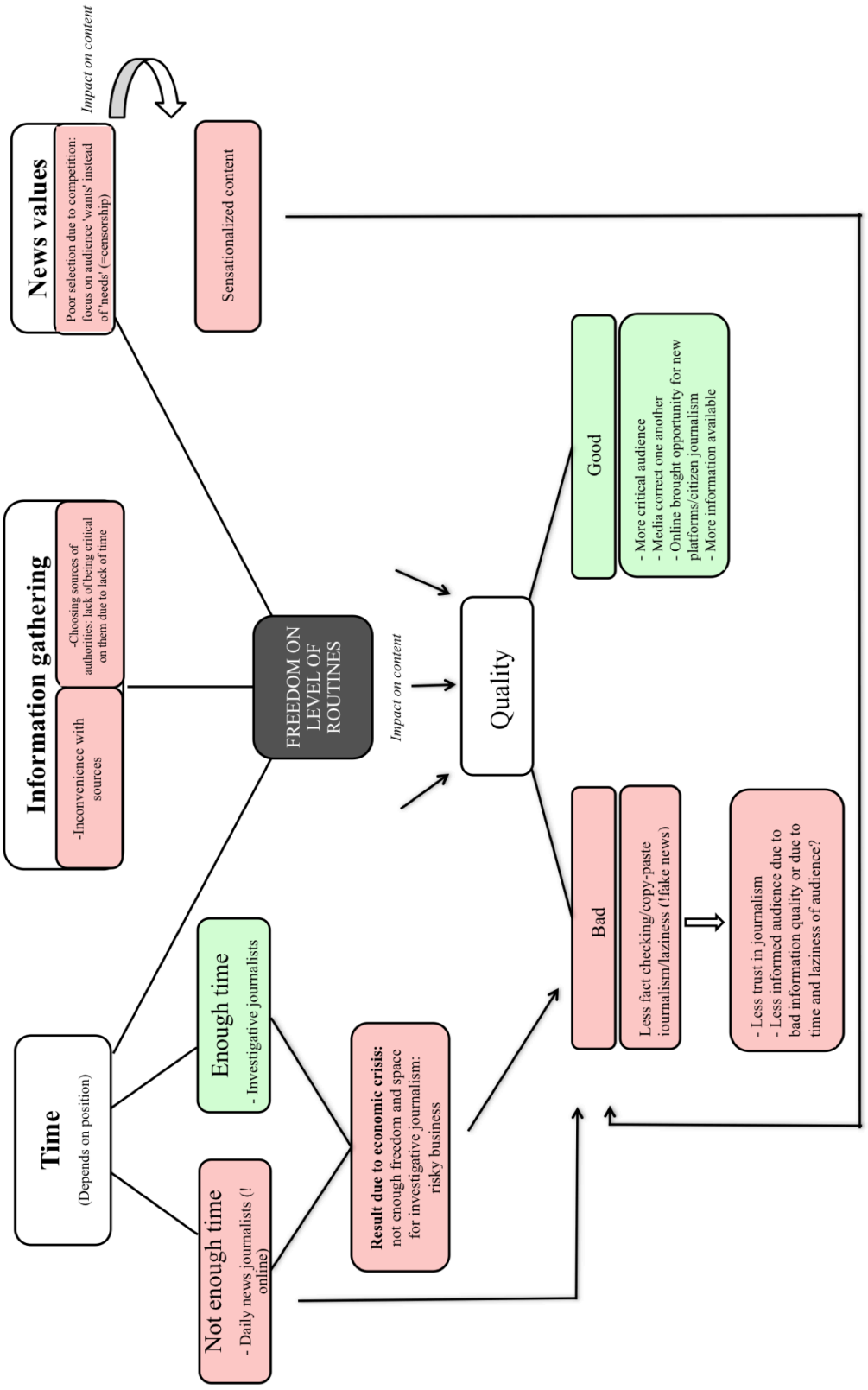

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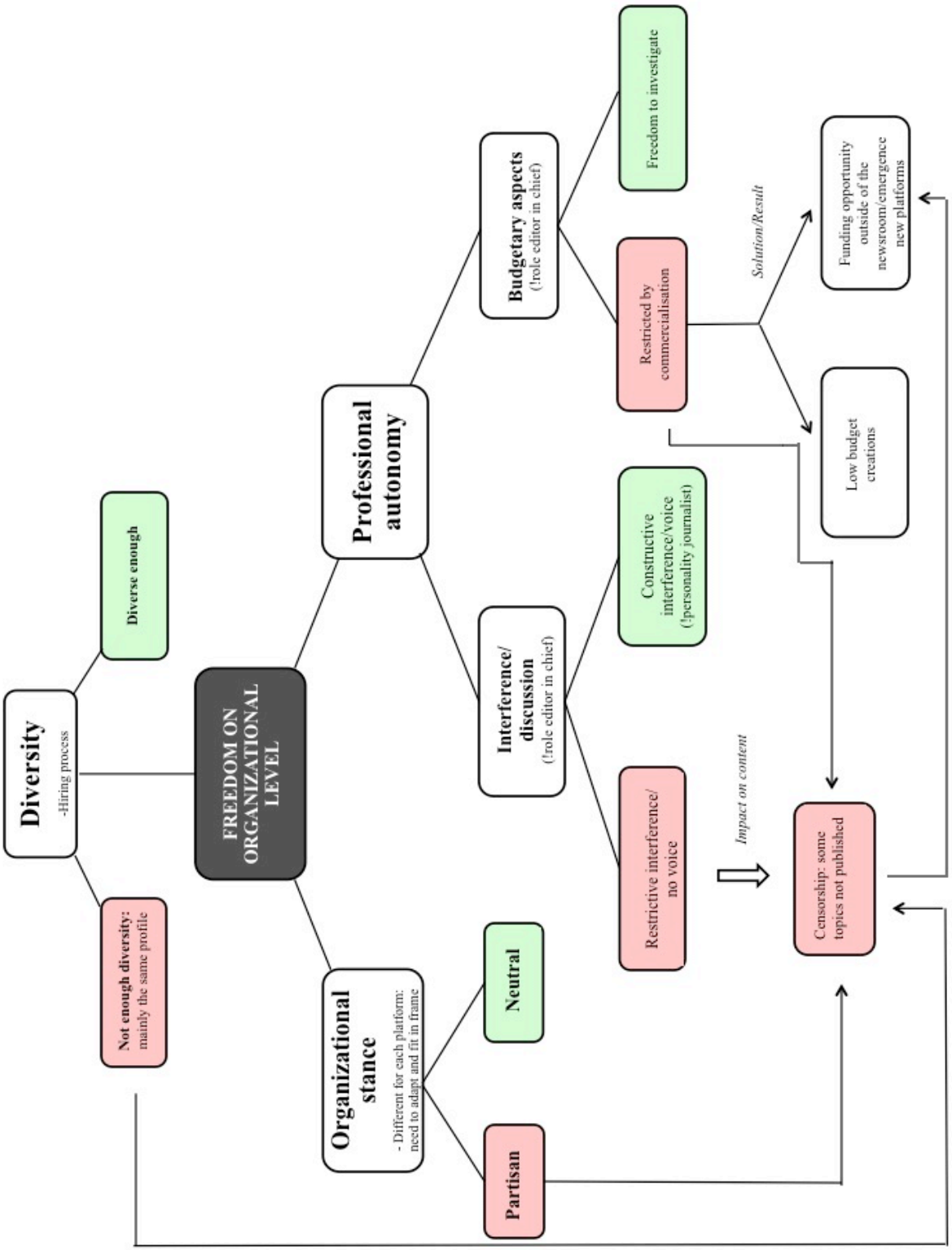

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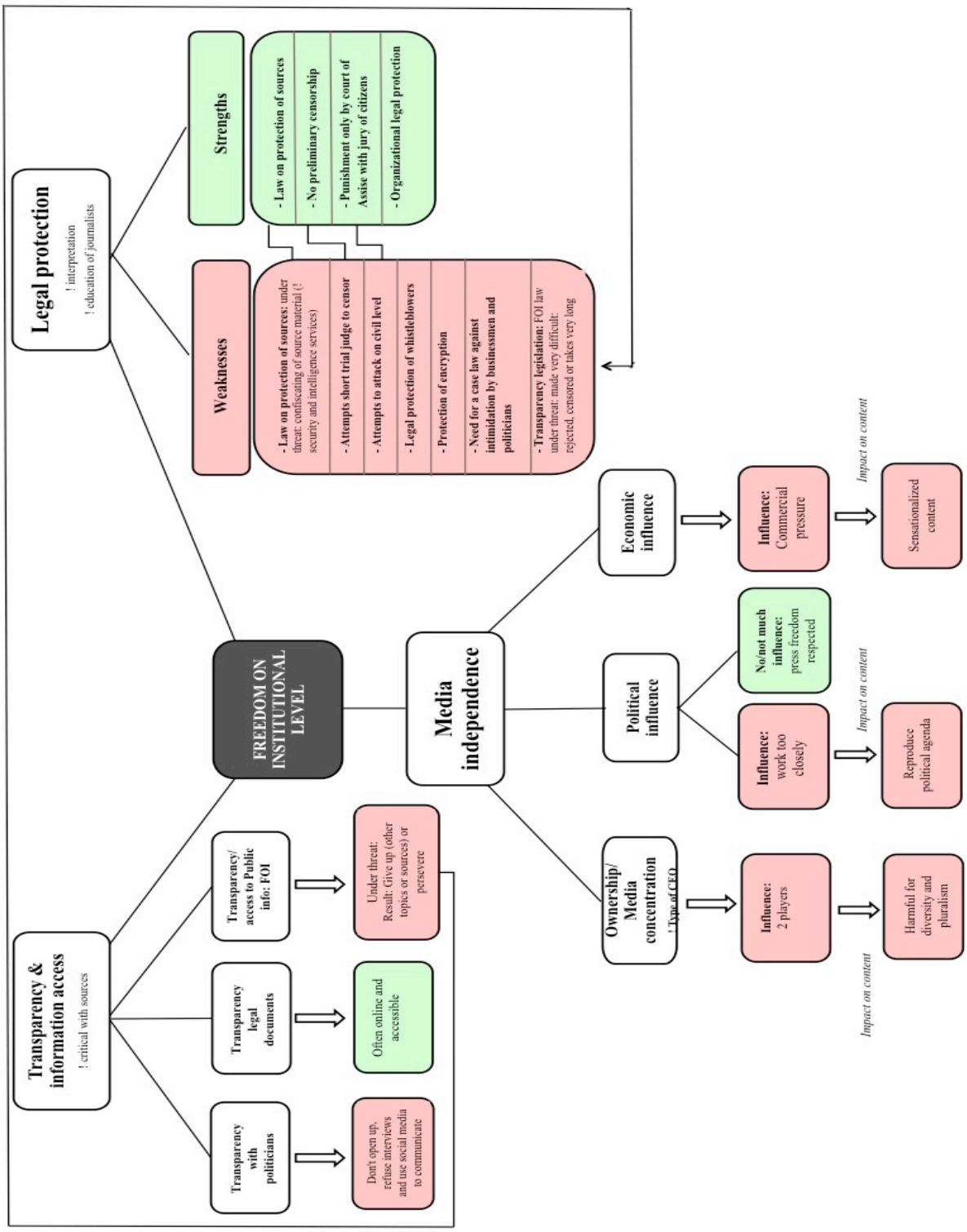
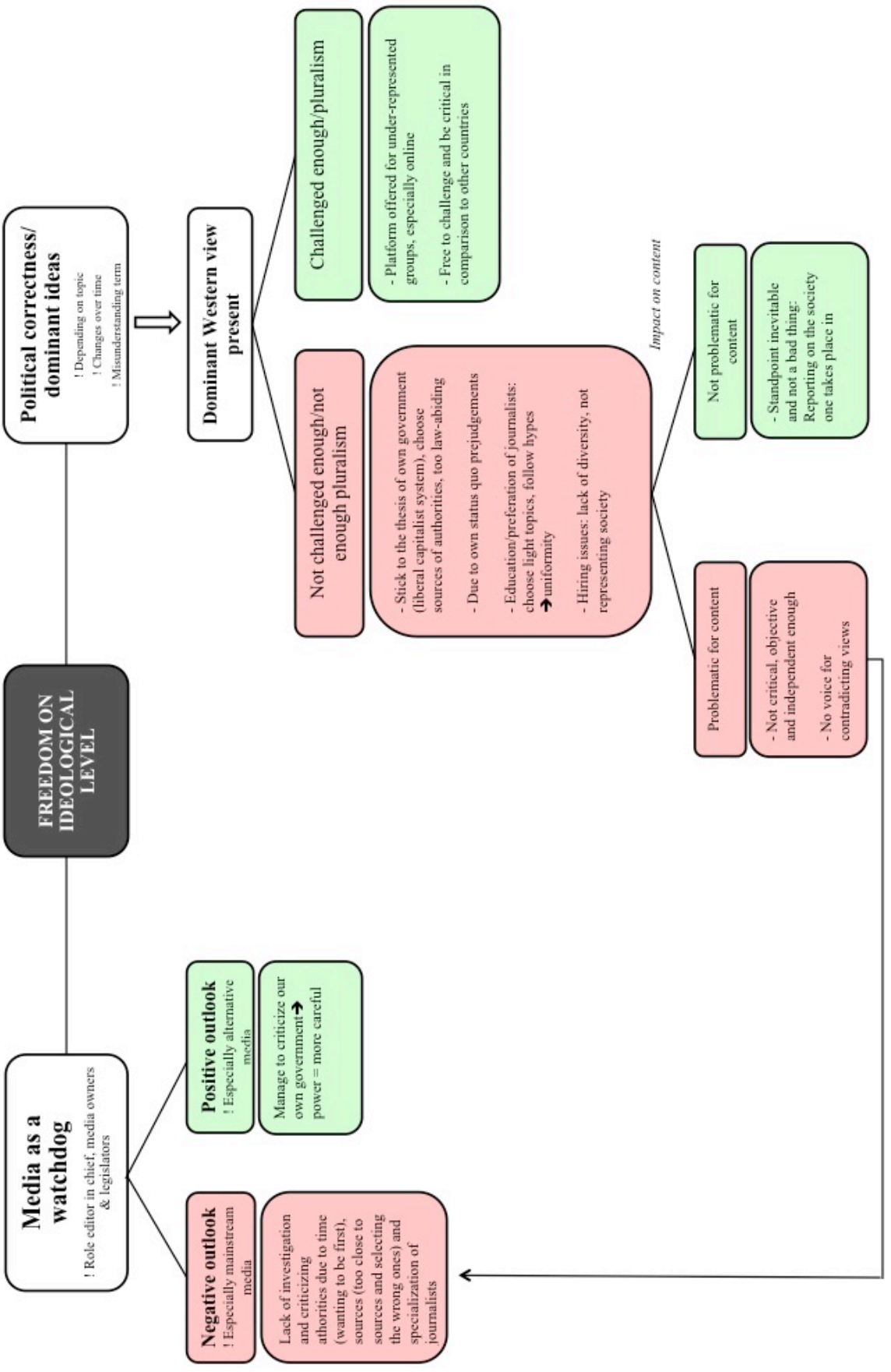
Coding diagram 5