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Research

Availability of information when practising journalism in Latvia

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The aim of the research is to gather the opinions and experience of Latvian journalists on cases when state/municipality institutions or officials refuse or unreasonably delay the provision of information. In the study, non-anonymous opinions were provided by 15 Latvian national and regional journalists, editors and producers. In addition, some journalists provided the information anonymously, entrusting it to the editor. In order to gain a broader view of information disclosure and journalists' rights, four lawyers specialising in media law gave interviews for the study. The study included semi-structured interviews, the transcript of which, together with the written answers, was coded using content analysis. Below are the 15 main findings of the study.

1. **15 out of 15 journalists were denied information for work purposes, it was unreasonably delayed or there were other difficulties in obtaining it.**
2. Access to information depends on the direction of journalism (more complex in investigative journalism), journalists' experience, personality features, personal contacts, openness of the institution/official, understanding of information openness and communication habits of public relations specialists.
3. Although some of the innovations introduced because of the Covid-19 pandemic (audio minutes of court hearings, access to regional media press conferences for regional media) improve information openness, in general remote work has created barriers to information openness that are not outweighed by the improvements. The most common - unable to ask questions at press conferences because they end;

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- questions outside the announced topic are not answered; the meetings were not broadcast on the internet for a certain period of time; the media do not have the opportunity to meet the officials, who also work remotely.
4. The most common reason heard by the journalists, when the information is refused, is the EU General Data Protection Regulation. **Nine journalists have often faced the authorities' excuses for not providing information of public importance, five have faced such excuse rarely or not at all.**
 5. **Trade secret, investigative interests, busyness, too many questions from the mass media, holidays** are other common excuses for the non-disclosure or slow preparation of information by public relations specialists and officials of institutions.
 6. **The problem is often the late provision of information, not the non-provision of it at all.** Four of the interviewed journalists have experienced cases in recent years, when the requested information has not been received for weeks, months or for almost a year.
 7. The procedure established by the Enterprise Register (ER) following the amendments to the law on permanent access to the non-public part of business registration files, if it is necessary for obtaining information in the public interest, has not yet been properly tested. Two of the interviewed journalists had applied for it in February 2021, but not received permission.
 8. The longest time was required to receive the recommendation/opinion of the university's communication science programme, which confirms the compliance of the journalist's activity with the essence of investigative journalism. Although this possibility of access to documents is called a compromise between the Latvian Association of Journalists and the Enterprise Register and the Ministry of Justice, it is the requirement to submit an evaluation of journalistic activities to some journalists that seems humiliating.
 9. The availability of information is greatly influenced by the personality and work style of the public relations/communication staff, personality of the head of the institution and understanding of the openness of information, as well as internal unwritten rules on how information is provided to the media. **The quality of cooperation is also determined by how often or rarely the institution comes into contact with journalists. In cases where communication is rare, cooperation may be interfered with by the position of defence.**
 10. Although the Freedom of Information Act requires authorities to provide information on request, and does not provide for the sorting of recipients of information, journalists have been treated unequally. Often **the most popular, largest, national and public broadcasting media are preferred.**
 11. Access to information is influenced by officials' and the public's understanding of freedom of speech, the role and functions of journalism in a democratic society. In Latvia, this understanding should be promoted, because **the interest or questions**
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of journalists are often only associated with harm, damage to reputation, etc.

12. Not only the possibility to organise interviews or receive answers, but also their content is important for the openness of information. In the experience of the interviewed journalists, access may be formally granted, but the information provided does not answer questions or is otherwise useful.
13. To improve access to information, journalists are proposing a number of organisational improvements (more open data, regular possibilities to meet officials online, who do not attend government press conferences, etc.), changes in the legal framework (mainly related to the transparency of the use of public funds), show interest in training to improve information gathering skills and knowledge of their rights.
14. The preferred topics for further education are related to the application of the EU General Data Protection Regulation in practical situations, including republishing

information from social media, and improving knowledge about information retrieval opportunities. Some journalists also emphasise the need for clear visual hand-outs.

15. Journalists' access to information or data processing for journalistic purposes is regulated by the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media, the Law on Information Transparency, and the Personal Data Processing Law. The results of the study show the need for journalists to know their rights in order to fill in the application accurately, when requesting the information, or to consider taking the next steps in the case of unjustified refusal. 