

CRIME JOURNALISM IN UKRAINE: TRUST, PREJUDICE AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA

Analytical report 2025



The analytical report “Crime Journalism in Ukraine: Trust, Prejudice and the Role of Media” was developed as part of the international project **“INSIGHT”** (Initiating New Standards in Journalism: Supporting (formerly) Incarcerated Groups with Honor and Tact), implemented by Young Agents of Change (Ukraine), in cooperation with AY Institute (Lithuania), Pirąšytos rankos (Lithuania), Scambieuropei (Italy) and Brodoto (Croatia) and funded by the European Union.

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The analytical report was prepared in collaboration with representatives of the Penitentiary Academy of Ukraine.

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About the Research

The media play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion about diverse social groups, including people who have been convicted, are serving or have served their sentences. The portrayal of (ex-)convicts and prisoners in the media impacts both their integration into society and the overall level of tolerance, as well as readiness of the community to facilitate their re-socialization.

During November 2024 - January 2025, the NGO “Young Agents of Change” as part of the international Erasmus+ project “INSIGHT” (Initiating New Standards in Journalism: Supporting (formerly) Incarcerated Groups with Honor and Tact) conducted a public opinion survey on media coverage of crimes in Ukraine.

With direct interaction and educational initiatives, the project intends to facilitate the reintegration of (ex-)convicted young people into community life, which in turn should improve safety and strengthen the community. The project highlights the importance of proper media portrayal and raising public awareness to overcome social stereotypes and prejudices.

This publication provides an analysis of the results of a public opinion survey on crime coverage in the Ukrainian media. The collected data provide an opportunity to better understand current trends, identify the level of bias and stereotypes in media discourse, and assess their impact on public perception of persons who have committed crimes or served their sentences. The survey also offers practical recommendations for ethical and balanced coverage of this topic, which will enhance media objectivity and social responsibility.

The analytical report will be useful for journalists, human rights activists, media researchers, penitentiary institutions staff, civil society activists, and anyone interested in raising journalism standards, developing a high-quality information space, promoting the principles of social justice, and facilitating the successful reintegration of (ex-)prisoners into society.



The Purpose of the Research

The research aims to assess the views of media representatives, the general public, people with experience in conviction (imprisonment) and penitentiary institutions staff on the objectivity of crime coverage in the Ukrainian media, and to identify the main challenges and opportunities for improving journalistic standards.

Methodology

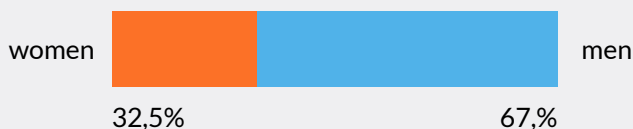
The research consists of two parts, specifically:

1. A survey of the general public and target groups with the possibility of anonymous filling (online format, distributed through social networks and partner channels of the NGO “Young Agents of Change”).
2. In-depth interviews with representatives of the target groups (journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, public figures, staff of penitentiary institutions).

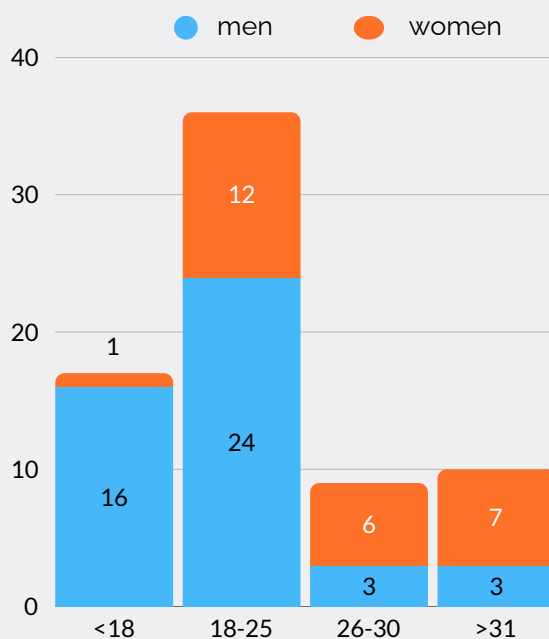
The results of the research are analyzed through such aspects as the neutrality, objectivity and transparency of journalism, as well as the perception of the images of victims and convicts created in the media.

Profile of Survey Respondents

The study surveyed 80 individuals.



Age distribution, years



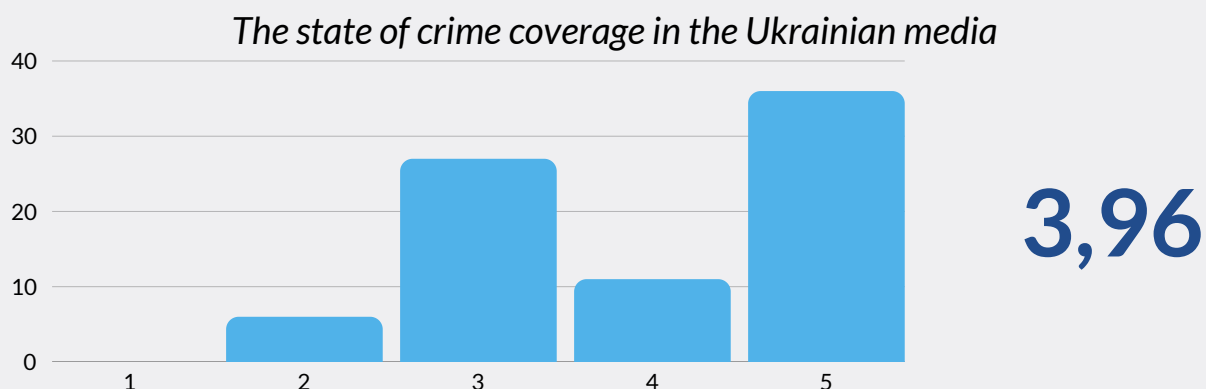
Target groups of respondents



Survey results

The respondents were asked to assess the current state of coverage of crime and criminality in the Ukrainian media in terms of neutrality, objectivity and transparency. The majority of respondents rated this state as average (from “1” to “5”, where “1” is low and “5” is high).

- 7.5% of respondents (6 people) gave a score of “2”, which indicates significant drawbacks in the coverage of crimes.
- One third of the respondents (33.75% - 27 people) gave a score of “3”, which indicates partial satisfaction.
- 13.75% (11 people) rated the level of coverage as “4”, which demonstrates a sufficient score.
- The highest score of “5” was given by 45% of respondents (36 people), which means overall satisfaction with the neutrality, objectivity and transparency of crime coverage.



In order to understand the situation in more detail, we analyzed the assessments by category. The highest level of trust in the media was found among the category of (ex-)prisoners. Mid-range scores prevailed among representatives of the general public and the media. The staff of penitentiary institutions demonstrated balanced assessments, distributing their answers between medium and high scores.

The main challenges mentioned by respondents in covering criminal news in Ukraine are:



censorship and restriction of access to information



stereotypes in the news reporting



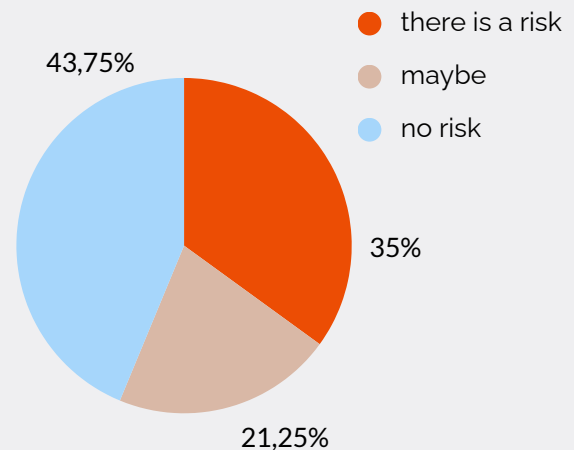
low level of professionalism of some journalists



impact of martial law, complicating the obtaining of objective data

In terms of considering the views of victims of crime, 78% of respondents believe that these views are rarely addressed or not taken into account at all. As for the views of (ex-)convicts, 82.5% of respondents say that these views are rarely reflected, which is a significant gap in journalistic coverage. Only 2.5% of respondents are confident that such points of view are regularly considered.

35% of respondents acknowledge the risk of prejudice against potential criminals before proving their guilt, while another 21.5% express uncertainty or admit the possibility of this risk. Representatives of the general public and the media are more likely to recognize this risk, while 41% of penitentiary staff believe that this risk exists.



- Respondents emphasize the need to comply with basic ethical principles in covering criminal news, namely:



avoidance of bias

respect for and observance of human rights

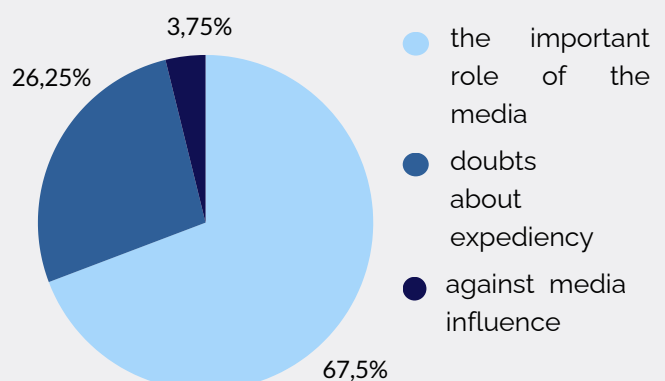


omission of emotional coloring tone

ensurance of professionalism and responsibility of journalists



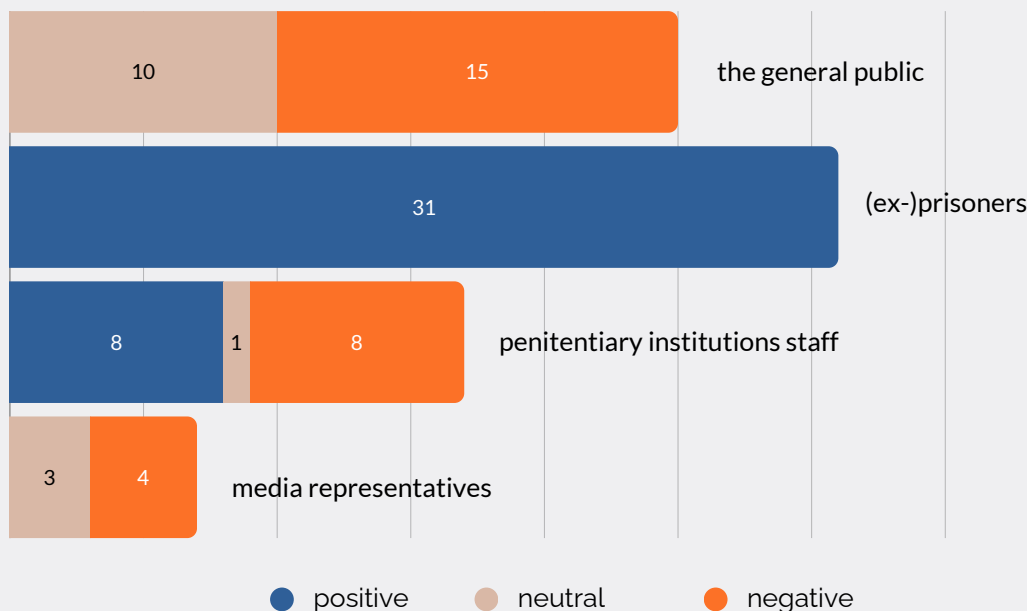
The majority of respondents (67.5%) agree that the media should play an important role in shaping narratives about crime and justice. 26.25% of respondents doubt the expediency or ethics of this process, and only 3.75% are strongly opposed to the media's influence on shaping such narratives.



Most respondents underlined that crime journalism should provide the public with information about crime and security in a neutral manner, with all sides' opinions presented without judgment.

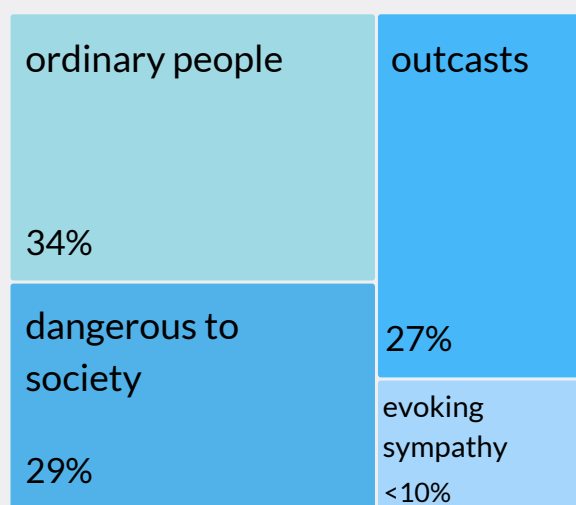
The survey showed that 60% of the general public believes that the Ukrainian media create a negative or very negative image of convicts, which reinforces stereotypes.

The image of convicts formed by the Ukrainian media



The image of prisoners in the media is perceived differently by different audiences. Among the general public, 60% of respondents believe that the media portray prisoners as dangerous to society, while among penitentiary staff this figure is 35%. Meanwhile, media representatives tend to believe that the media convey a neutral or sympathetic image of prisoners.

The image of people in prison



General Summary of the Survey

Respondents recognize the important role of the media in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice. However, many point out the presence of prejudice, particularly towards potential criminals before they are proven guilty. A significant number of respondents noted shortcomings in taking into account the views of victims and convicts. At the same time, the majority of respondents underscored the need to improve the professionalism of journalists to strengthen trust in the media.

Profile of Interview Respondents

Within the framework of the research, interviews were conducted with five representatives of the target groups: journalist Natalia Nadiuk, blogger Erwin Miden, representatives of the penitentiary system Anna Sereda and Dmytro Kyselov, and a probation client who wished to remain anonymous. The discussion focused on the observance of ethical standards in the media, objectivity in the coverage of criminal cases and the necessity to ensure the rights of all parties in criminal proceedings.



Results of the Interviews

Journalists highlighted the necessity of balancing the public's right to information with the protection of the rights of victims and suspects. They also emphasized the importance of the principle of presumption of innocence to avoid early conclusions and public condemnation of those still under investigation.

Crime journalism should inform the public about crimes, investigations and court proceedings while maintaining ethical standards

One of the key issues is the stigmatization of victims, especially children, who may suffer additional harm due to the disclosure of the details of the crime. Journalists and bloggers noted that reporting should be based on facts, not emotions or subjective judgments. Blogger Erwin underscored that journalists should avoid being influenced by other media and not reproduce manipulative narratives.

Representatives of the penitentiary system drew attention to the risks of one-sided coverage of events, which can lead to manipulation and distortion of the real situation. The probation client pointed out that the limited access to all parties to the conflict makes it difficult to compile an objective journalistic material.

- An insightful observation was made by media representatives:

*incorrectly presented information can both “smear”
and “justify” the offender*

A representative of the penitentiary system emphasized that media manipulation can influence not only public opinion but also legal proceedings. At the same time, in the case of high-profile cases, journalists must adhere to exceptionally high standards of transparency and ethics.

Many participants stressed the problems of one-sided coverage of crime in the media, which underscores the need for professional improvement of journalists. Discussed examples of manipulation included bringing up public accusations before official confirmation of guilt.

During the interviews, there were difficulties in engaging people who had been convicted or were currently serving a sentence. Most of them provided vague answers, perhaps to avoid unnecessary attention or to meet the expectations of their surroundings. This may be due to the desire to appear “good” or to the fact that many of them have not given much thought to the topic of crime coverage in the media.

Some respondents refused to record their interviews, probably due to negative experiences with the media or concerns about the misuse of their words. To deal with these challenges, alternative interview formats were offered - written answers and video recording without disclosure of personal data and faces. This helped create a more comfortable environment for the expression of opinions.

- In conclusion, the results of the interviews confirmed the importance of ethical approach to crime journalism, the need for unbiased coverage of events and an improvement in the level of professional responsibility of journalists.



Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the interviews and survey emphasize the critical importance of ethical crime reporting in strengthening trust in the media and shaping balanced and objective public narratives.

The main findings of the survey:

Prejudice is perceived as a moderate problem - while most respondents believe that bias in news coverage is rare, a significant number see it as a widespread problem.

The points of view of victims of crime and former prisoners are often not taken into account, which produces limited and one-sided coverage.

There is a problem of prejudice and sensationalism in the media, which affects the objectivity of coverage of criminal stories.

The media often shape a biased view of ex-convicts and prisoners, portraying them in a negative light, as noted by a significant number of respondents.

Another important issue is the lack of neutrality in the reporting of criminal news, which can affect the public perception of justice.

Crime journalism in Ukraine is in need of evolution to ensure a more balanced, ethical and inclusive approach.

Recommendations:

To prioritize the inclusion of the views of victims of crime and former prisoners to create more encompassing and just narratives

To ensure that journalists comply with ethical standards to prevent bias and sensationalism

To encourage the media to check facts and present criminal stories from a neutral perspective to guarantee objective coverage

To support the development of a mediaspace that will foster a legal system that respects all voices and interests of society

To cultivate ethical journalism that not only covers crimes, but also pursues justice, protects human rights and advocates for a society where truth is more important than sensationalism

