

Ljiljana Lj. Bulatović i Goran Bulatović

Faculty of Media and Communication, University Singidunum, Belgrade
ljiljana.bulatovic@fmk.edu.rs
goran.bulatovic@fmk.edu.rs

Media Frames of COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

It has long been noticed that the problem of public information provision has shifted from collecting and selling information to protecting the public from disinformation, and to inability to follow all the information published about any topic. Media coverage in times of crisis, such as the pandemic, has revealed and heightened the extent of the problem of public information provision. In this paper, we present our belief that professional journalists have not responded well to their basic task – providing accurate, impartial, reliable and important information to the public. Instead, the media has often published information based on assumptions, emotions and views of interest to certain social groups, rather than the general public. The banning of large gatherings and events that are a common source of information, limited movement of people and journalists, focus on official sources with limited ability for data verification, extensive use of social media and general disruption of daily editorial routines, have led to the non-compliance with the core principles of journalism. Instead of facts, the media were dominated by interpretations and emotions, which, in combination with poor general media literacy, has led to the spread of fear and distrust in media and institutions. In this paper, we advocate adherence to the Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis (adopted in

2007), and improvement in general media literacy in society, so that the media can effectively perform their social role, and the citizens can critically evaluate information available in times of crisis.

Key words: pandemic, infodemia, journalism, media frameworks, media literacy.

Introduction

The year 2020, besides the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, will be remembered by an unprecedented noise in the media sphere, overwhelmed and infected by theories, opinions, expertise, exclusives and sensations in which “actuality, importance, relevance and attractiveness” (Todorović, 2002: 64) – as the most important characteristics of news – have assumed new meaning, and the public, it is now clear, has gotten a new perimeter for navigating through the media. In the first couple of months of the COVID-19 pandemic, serious, analytical and investigative approaches, based on facts and best journalistic practice, which are relied upon for “independent, reliable, correct and comprehensive information” (Kovach, Rozenstil, 2006), seemed unable to keep up with amateurish, unverified, de-contextualised and thus clouded opinions, that were placed in the media, counting on, and succeeding in making attractiveness or exclusivity the most important criterion for publishing. The media industry confirmed its enormous power and strength, showing genuine responsibility in providing timely and truthful information to the public about the pandemic, but at the same time unveiling the other side of that strength by creating mass hysteria and panic. In both cases, the influence of journalists and journalism, and their power to intensify the impact and legitimacy of something they report about is very visible (Schudson, 2003).

Journalists and journalism have demonstrated their knowledge and skills, their impact, and the power of tools at their disposal. However, as it is always the case with a crisis, a range of weaknesses of the profession have become visible. The most visible weakness is the one symbolised by problems brought to traditional journalism by digital agenda, and we could observe in real time “how capitalism is turning the internet against democracy” (McChesney, 2015). Old weaknesses, invigorated by the new context, such as divergence between politics and facts, and submissiveness of the media towards the centres of power, additionally point to a serious problem in journalistic practice during the pandemic, when a journalist remains loyal to an impression or belief, or when subjective judgements take precedence over verification and facts (Chomsky 2002; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). All the contradictions of our time are intensified and heightened, and the rules and conditions of post-truth have revealed “information disorder” (Wardle, 2019) as a kind of a framework in which a media

user is torn between verification and facts on one side, and disinformation, misinformation and false news on the other (Wardle, 2017). The phenomenon of post-truth regains importance in the time of pandemic and its reframing of reality. The pluralism of interpretations of diverse “truths”, justified by personal objectivity based primarily on emotional engagement, poses a serious threat to verification and facts by giving precedence to alternative sources of information. “The weapon of context – the use of original content in a distorted and redefined form” (Wardle, 2019) becomes one of the dominant tools of “information disorder”, and of all the journalist’s roles, two become important: “interpreter” and “populist mobiliser” (Weaver, Wilnat, Wilhoit, 2018).

In such an environment and framework, the first infodemic³ in the history of human civilisation was announced, giving birth to probably one of the most quoted statements in the first half of 2020: “We’re not just fighting an epidemic, we’re fighting an infodemic.”⁴ The media gave support to the WHO when it invited technological companies, like Facebook, to help in the prevention of infodemic by globally imposing stricter measures in controlling placed information.⁵ The WHO has formed its teams in Geneva and six regional offices: Africa, North and South America, South-east Asia, Eastern Mediterranean and Western Pacific, with the task of identifying fake and unreliable information that can harm public health. When they find false or incorrect information, rumours, fake news, etc., their task is to refute them by information based on facts and evidence, and to publish, on the official website and through their social media network, all the news on the epidemic and all the information on identified rumours⁶.

Infodemic and the pandemic psychology – a new challenge for journalism

The term infodemic is not new, the flood of information is being talked about for decades, ever since the ICT showed the speed, might and power that they add to information. Infodemic as a phenomenon, and as a consequence of epidemic, appeared in 2003: “SARS is the story of not one epidemic but two, and the second epidemic, the one that has largely escaped the headlines, has implications that are far greater than the disease itself. That is because it is not the viral epidemic but rather an “information epidemic” that has transformed SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, from a bungled Chinese regional health crisis into a global economic and social debacle.”⁷

3 Blend of the words information and epidemic, referring to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something, Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning> Accessed: 02 August 2020

4 Ghebreyesus, Tedros Adhanom. Munich Security Conference, 15 February 2020 <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference> Accessed: 02 August 2020

5 See: Thomas Z., WHO says fake coronavirus claims causing ‘infodemic’, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51497800> Accessed: 02 August 2020

6 World Health Organization. Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13 (02 February 2020) https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf?sfvrsn=195f4010_6 Accessed: 02 August 2020

7 David J. Rothkopf, article in the Washington Post, May 11, 2003

The scale of the “economic and social debacle”, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying infodemic will be examined comprehensively and in detail in the years after the pandemic. It is too early for drawing any conclusions, although it is clear that consequences in all areas are far reaching. A number of research projects that examine a wide spectre of phenomena, and the influence of the pandemic on a range of spheres of life and work, corroborate this claim (Liu, Q, Zheng, Z, Zheng, J. at all, 2020; Milutinović, I, 2020; Roser M, Ritchie H, Ortiz-Ospina E, Hasell J, 2020; Motta, M, Stecula, D, Farhart, Ch, 2020; Pennycook G, McPhetres J, Zhang Y, Rand G.D, 2020; La, Viet-Phuong; Pham, Thanh-Hang; Ho, Manh-Toan; Nguyen, Minh-Hoang; P. Nguyen, Khanh-Linh; Vuong, Thu-Trang; Nguyen, Hong-Kong T.; Tran, Trung; Khuc, Quy; Ho, Manh-Tung; Vuong, Quan-Hoang. 2020; Gallotti, R, Valle, F, Castaldo, N, Sacco, P, De Domenico, M, 2020).

Additionally, the emotional aspect, with all the social and economic interaction, suggests an insight into another segment of the pandemic framework, which influences life, and subsequently media as well. In the 1990-ies, British sociologist Filip Strong developed a theory and a model of a comprehensive epidemic psychology. In his model, Strong identified and described clear frames and provided explanations, always observing his model in the context of psycho-social relations during and towards the pandemics. He based his epidemic psychology on the examination of a deep contrast between surface rationality of everyday life, and the raw emotions that lurk beneath (Strong, 1990). We believe that the pandemic psychology, as an important frame that strongly determines psycho-social relations and interactions in life during the pandemic, is also a frame within which the media and journalists also operate, and to which they respond by reflecting the reality. Reactions and behaviours are characteristic and very specific, relying on “primitive and irrational emotions that are buried within every human being” (Strong, 1990), practically they are kinds of epidemics within an epidemic (Strong, 1990).

- fear and panic; personal fear has no boundaries and collective fear becomes the norm of behaviour, and the norm of democracy;
- explanation and moralisation; they often lead to stigmatisation of those with the disease or those who belong to potential carrier groups;
- action and often action at all costs, good or excessive and ill-conceived, which puts the individual back into the fear zone;
- everyone who wishes or needs to say something – now has an excellent opportunity to do so.

In a way, Strong summarizes his theory using the following words: “When the conditions are right, epidemics can potentially create a medical version of the Hobbesian nightmare – the war of all against all, followed by fear, panic, suspicion and stigma, by mass outbreaks of moral controversy, and potential solutions. This distinctive collective social psychology is rooted in the fundamental properties of language and human interaction” (Strong, 1990).

Each of the described characteristics of epidemic psychology, apart from having a deep psychological meaning and specific nature, is also a firm framework that media or individual journalists cannot escape. Neither individuals, nor any segments of society are immune to them, especially when an epidemic is new, such as COVID-19. For a long time it was a kind of taboo, even today, after 10 months since its appearance, it surprises, bewilders, scares and paralyses. “The distinctive social psychology produced by large-scale epidemic disease can potentially result in a fundamental, if short-term, collapse of conventional social order. All kinds of disparate but corrosive effects may occur... For a moment at least, the world may be turned upside down” (Strong, 1990).

Indeed – by living in a permanent state of emergency, more or less officially declared, the world has transformed itself to the extent that questions such as: What have we sacrificed for safety? Freedom? Trust in institutions? Truth? – have largely replaced the initial questions related to the safety and finding the cure for the new infection: “A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one. We live in a society that has sacrificed freedom for so-called ‘security reasons’ and has hence condemned itself to living in a perpetual state of fear and insecurity” (Agamben, 2020).

Information policy in a crisis

It has happened that the right to accurate and timely information, which public likes to see as “the right to the truth” – has remained overshadowed by a range of so called emergency measures and decrees, overshadowed by natural fear for life’s essentials, and the life itself, even overshadowed by the new everyday life in which reality constructed by the media has to face competition. In other words, the crisis was managed by politicians and medical experts, and the media followed them, mostly trying to keep up, and rarely succeeding in being one step ahead. Bearing in mind that “crisis management consists of five key activities: identification, decision making, explanation, termination and learning” (Gaćinović, 2011:313), the role of the media is seen as a part of the crisis management, because the media have the greatest responsibility for communicating every stage of these activities. In a crisis, information policy is comprised of “laws, regulations, and doctrinal positions – and other decision making and practices with society-wide constitutive effects – involving information creation, processing, flows, access and use” (Braman, 2011:3).

By definition, “Crisis appears when the key values (safety, security, health, integrity, justice, wealth or production, etc.) and/or survival of a community are threatened. The greater the nature and scope of the threat, the bigger the crisis. Crisis is a state in which society ceases to function following the principles of democratic organisation. It represents a set of legal norms that are in the given circumstances conflicted, and thus slow down or speed up the chain of events, i.e. the process of crisis escalation or the process of crisis management” (Gaćinović, 2011:306). Of course, in the times of crisis, media and communication in general are bound by crisis norms and rules that restrict freedoms, and the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental

Freedoms, allows that guaranteed human right to freedom of expression can be conditioned and restricted: “in the interest of national security, public safety, ... for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health.” The most important elements in managing crisis situations such as pandemics are a sound communication plan and a good media strategy. “The perception of a crisis is followed by a high level of insecurity related to the nature and potential consequences of the threat” (Gaćinović, 2011:307).

In the times of COVID-19 pandemic, the extent of the need for well-defined communication that will not suppress the truth, and the right to accurate and timely information, is evident from a range of actions undertaken around the world (some have already been mentioned), such as the address by an international team of experts from the UN, OSCE, and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. They have warned that: “Human health...also depends on access to accurate information about the nature of the threats and the means to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s community. The right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, through any media, applies to everyone, everywhere, and may only be subject to narrow restrictions”⁸ (Kaye, 2020). This group of experts urges the world’s governments to follow these five steps:

1. It is essential that governments provide truthful information about the nature of the threat posed by the coronavirus;
2. Internet access is critical at a time of crisis. It is essential that governments refrain from blocking internet access;
3. The right of access to information means that governments must be making exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists. Journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency. We urge all governments to robustly implement their freedom of information laws to ensure that all individuals, especially journalists, have access to information.
4. False information about the pandemic could lead to health concerns, panic and disorder. In this connection, it is essential that governments and internet companies address disinformation in the first instance by themselves providing reliable information. Resorting to other measures, such as content take-downs and censorship should only be undertaken where they meet the standards of necessity and proportionality. Any attempts to criminalise information relating to the pandemic may create distrust in institutional information, delay access to reliable information and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression;
5. Individual rights to privacy, and non-discrimination, the protection of journalistic sources and other freedoms should be rigorously protected; States must also protect the personal information

8 The experts: Mr David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Mr Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and Mr Edison Lanza, IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, 19 March 2020; available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25729>.

of patients. We strongly urge that any use of such technology abide by the strictest protections and only be available according to domestic law that is consistent with international human rights standards.

Disinformation is an old story, fuelled by new technology⁹

It is probably an exaggeration that journalism based on verified facts and working in public interest has lost the race with disinformation¹⁰ and unverified information, but it is not an exaggeration that it remained in their shadow. Moreover, we were witnesses to unwelcome situations in which journalism became a channel for the transmission of disinformation (one of the more frequently mentioned is media conference in which the citizens of Serbia were recommended to go shopping to Trieste¹¹, when it was already known that 80 countries in the world are struggling with an unknown virus). The examples of myths, disinformation, manipulation, irresponsible statements by various greater or lesser authorities, satire and parody, *clickbait* headlines, deceptive descriptions, decontextualized content published under a false name¹² – in general, everything than falls into the category of disinformation, abounds in all corners of the world. From the statement that the virus is a “media trick”¹³, that it is “not a virus but a bacteria”¹⁴, that “corona will be fried by sunlight”¹⁵, that “5G networks spread the virus”¹⁶, to Bill Gates who “planned it all in order to enlarge his wealth”¹⁷, and so on, as so forth. All such content added strength to the infodemic, and spurred disinformation into uncontrolled spreading over social networking sites, practically reaching every individual. Media have mostly been additional channels for spreading disinformation, whereas the task of verification and “the struggle to identify the truth and facts in the times of pandemic in Serbia has been assumed by small independent investigative media services, such as Krik, Cenzolovka, CINS, BIRN, predominantly present only on the Internet” (Marjanović, 2020). Therefore, the infodemic managed to cloud journalists’ view, and further diminish already feeble trust in the media. The

9 Title taken from: *Journalism, “Fake news” & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, UNESCO, 2020, p. 9; available at: <http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>

10 Terms “false information” and “disinformation” are used in the paper in opposition to verifiable information which are in the interest of the public, and are the result of the work of professional journalists, as suggested by the UNESCO manual quoted in the paper.

11 Quote of the day: Doktor za humor (*Humour Doctor*), <https://www.bizlife.rs/izjava-dana-doktor-za-humor-vid-eo/> (Accessed: 20 August 2020).

12 The typology of false news, based on 34 research papers dealing with this phenomenon is suggested by: Tandoc C. E., Wei Lim Z. and Ling R. (2017). Defining “Fake News”: A typology of scholarly definitions, *Digital Journalism*, pages 137-153. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143>

13 Bolsonaro protiv korona virusa: trikovi i fantazije, (*Bolsonaro against the corona virus: tricks and phantasies*), <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30509324.html> (Accessed: 20 August 2020).

14 RASKRIKAVANJE.RS/Live blog o dezinformacijama o koronavirusu, projekt portala KRIK, (UNMASKING.RS/ Live blog on disinformation and the coronavirus, project by KRIK Portal), <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/covid19/?vrsta=dezinformacije> (Accessed: 20 August 2020).

15 Ibid. 11

16 Ibid. 11

17 Ibid. 11

same narratives abounded in the news and in disinformation, and social media have really shown their power to “amplify human intent” (Chakrabarti, 2018) in both senses – entrepreneurial and disinformational.

The news industry is going through a transformation which is fatal for the profession, according to ones, or the second chance for journalism, according to others. The former claim: “Digital technology, social platforms and the spread of false information and disinformation – have transformed the news industry, creating a new crisis for journalism, with increasingly evident consequences for journalists, the media and the society” (Posetti, Ireton, Wardle, Derakhshan, Matthews, Abu-Fadil, Trewinnard, Bell, Mantzarlis, 2020:18). The latter say that false news have given journalism a new chance: “Quality journalism is given an opportunity to show its value based on expertise, ethics, engagement and experience. It is a wake-up call to be more transparent, relevant and to add value to people’s lives. It can develop a new business model of fact checking, myth busting and generally getting its act together as a better alternative to fakery” (Beckett, 2017).

How much have television and the traditional media in Serbia, and in the region, truly developed new fact-checking services – we do not know, no one has publicly reported that information. However, they have been the most trusted media, and it can be said that they have taken their second chance. The survey, “Media outlook of the region, before and during the COVID-19 crisis”, done by IPSOS in Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Albania, confirms this claim: “If it was true for the pre-COVID period that considering informative programme, television as a medium dominated in the region, it is also true that its influence during the COVID crisis has increased. Television as a source of information on the corona virus, and the subsequent social, economic and global crisis, has simply become irreplaceable” (IPSOS, 2020).

Journalists and journalism are facing a challenge that has not been given sufficient attention, neither by editorial boards, nor by the society in general: “Disinformation online, and exploitation and manipulation with our information environment are real, complex problems that affect global societies. Making the term “fake news” omnipresent and confusing, we have lost a battle in the real war against completely false information” (Silverman, 2018). The only shield are the core professional values, referred to by the journalist of the subsequently published (verified) news on the working conditions of staff in one of the clinical centres in Serbia¹⁸, facing herself and the public with the harsh truth that “the trust in reporting that is accurate, responsible and independent” (Bulatović, Bulatović, 2009) is not always a guarantee of the public trust. The most important journalistic values: “accurate news, opposition to government, pressure groups, police that threatens or intimidates, opposition to censors, ...balance between individual right to privacy and the public interest, transparency of sources” (Bell, 2015), have been overshadowed by fear and panic, imposed by frames dictated by the pandemic and the Crisis headquarters, which was

¹⁸ <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a584860/Ana-Lalic-o-privodjenju-i-tekstu-o-KCV.html>

promoted as the sole relevant source of information, i. e. the spokesperson of the dominant centre of power in the country.¹⁹

Regardless of the fact that journalists have been pointing to covert censorship and circumstances that discourage professional reporting, crisis management has not recognized this. The public has shown some sporadic recognition, among other things, because of: the banning of large gatherings and events that are a common source of information; limited movement of people and journalists; focus on official sources with limited ability for data verification; extensive use of social media and general disruption of daily editorial routines, that have led to the establishment of an institutional framework which unequivocally suggested that only what is official is accurate.²⁰ Any form of pluralism was out of question. The Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis as the guarantee of a “truly democratic society” have remained below the general public’s radar, since neither media nor institutions contributed in any way to ensure that media professionals and the public are “encouraged, directly or through their representative organisations, to engage in a constructive dialogue with the authorities in situations of crisis.” (CoE, Guidelines: 28-29).

The five core journalistic principles: truthfulness, accuracy, independence, fairness, humanity/confidentiality, accountability, to which UNESCO adds integrity and transparency (Posetti, Ireton, Wardle, Derakhshan, Matthews, Abu-Fadil, Trewinnard, Bell, Mantzarlis, 2020:26) are a shield from a newly imposed framework dominated by populist discourse which, as the reporting in the first months of the pandemic showed, makes it difficult for journalists to give media content necessary clarity that would give credence to that content. Of course, the trust in media and journalism is not exclusively the result of the framework imposed by the pandemic and institutions. The crisis of trust and constant doubt towards the media have been present for many years, and this is not characteristic of our region only. In one of the latest international surveys, up to 57% of respondents say that media they turn to for information are contaminated by unreliable information (Elderman Trust Barometer, 2020). Moreover, World Press Freedom Index 2020 compiled by Reporters without borders (RSF), which evaluates the situation for journalists each year in 180 countries of the world, besides suggesting that the next ten years will be pivotal for press freedom, warns that Covid-19 pandemic highlights and amplifies the many crises that threaten the right to freely reported, independent, diverse and reliable information (RSF, 2020).

19 Sve krize Kriznog štaba, (*All the crises of crisis headquarters*) <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53257800> (Accessed: 30 August 2020).

20 Informacije o Korona virusu ubuduće samo od Kriznog štaba – novinari ukazuju na cenzuru , (*Information on the coronavirus in the future only from the crisis headquarters – journalists warn about censorship*), <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Informacije-o-korona-virusu-ubuduce-samo-od-Kriznog-staba-novinari-ukazuju-na-prikrivenu-cenzuru.sr.html> (Accessed: 30 August 2020).

Media literacy versus infodemic and disinformation

Media and information literacy, as an overarching concept used by UNESCO (2015) to highlight the importance of developing media and information competences, is actually a key lifelong skill needed for navigating through the world of (dis)information. Pandemic and infodemic, each in its way, have framed the social space, not only through psycho-social interaction, but also through the actions of the media and their overall practice. Media and the accompanying digital literacy is necessary for safer and smarter navigation by users through the world of information. Pandemic and infodemic have shown that knowledge of news literacy, which includes journalistic standards and ethics, is essential for navigation in a space contaminated by crisis and saturated by information and (dis)information. When a user masters the skills of media and information literacy, he/she will strengthen his/her attitude towards the news and its inbuilt narrative, understand that news is a construct that (Bulatović, Bulatović, 2013) by definition should be free of opinion and viewpoint (Kovach, Rozenstil, 2007), that journalists adhere to professional methods, criteria and ethical norms that protect them from mistakes, and serve as a shield from disinformation that dominates social media, precisely because information there is not created by professional journalists.

Additionally, by understanding news as a construct based on certain rules, they will strengthen their attitude towards journalists, and become aware that everyone, the user and the author alike, have cognitive biases that can get in the way of factual understanding, since everyone understands information according to their previous knowledge, attitudes and prejudice (Poter, 2015). The time of post-truth and the dominance of the so called alternative facts, combined with emotional tension, empowers populist rhetoric that encourages the spread of disinformation and the dominance of unverified information. The recognition, evaluation, and deconstruction of such information, by professionals in the first place, and by media users in the second, are important steps towards safe navigation in the world saturated with information. "Equipping people with the skills needed to decode various messages is an ongoing struggle that media educators and journalists are all asked to join. Media literacy helps people to find an equilibrium between trust of news sources and the necessary suspicion to question them" (Posetti, Ireton, Wardle, Derakhshan, Matthews, Abu-Fadil, Trewinnard, Bell, Mantzaris, 2020:78). Critical analysis skills are therefore irreplaceable, because they will enable, first basic, and then, with time, wider understanding of cognitive biases that can get in the way of factual understanding. They improve capacity to distinguish fact-checkable claims from opinions and alternative facts, enable users to ask key questions about the media and media content, and provide them with the tools to strengthen their position as users in relation to the media. Journalists will obtain tools that will help them navigate through enormous quantity of information in order to reach appropriate sources. Critical analysis skills may help media industry to face the challenges brought about by the digital agenda, and give it a chance for a fairer game in an environment in which everyone can create and publish content and draw audience.

The pandemic and infodemic have enabled disinformation to seriously undermine professional and accountable journalism. Media and information literacy, combined with consistent compliance with generally accepted guidelines on reporting in times of crisis, and education of users in basic literacy related to news, information and disinformation – are valuable tools for the preservation of trust in media, especially the traditional ones, but also for safe navigation in digitally networked world in which information replace one another at the speed of light, often leaving an indelible mark behind them.

Conclusion

In April 2020, an advisory group for public policy, Balkans in Europe (BiEPAG), issued a publication *Western Balkans in times of global pandemic*, saying that: “COVID-19 pandemic represents a crisis of such proportions that could, without doubt, change the course of history. To some extent, it has already accelerated the existing trends, such as the crisis of democracy and the rise of nationalism. Additionally, in only a couple of weeks, it has changed the world, Western Balkans included, through the rise of the national state and intense de-globalisation (BiEPAG, 2020). The publication highlights nine areas (the role of the state, hijacking democracy, geopolitical changes, new nationalisms, social resilience, the impact on the living environment, migrations and healthcare, health and social welfare and their impact on the economy) in which, the authors claim, “it is the most likely that the pandemics and the government measures have the greatest impact.” Although media were not allocated “their own” chapter, their importance and role is clearly pointed out: “The fight against false news can be led by open and transparent communication of the government bodies, with expert leadership. Repressive measures do not threaten false media, but the independent and more critical ones. Securitisation and restriction measures should be applied with care, in combination with education and communication, and not instead of them” (BiEPAG, 2020).

New frames elaborated in this paper, within which the media operate in times of the pandemic, require new answers to multiple challenges we all witness. Besides the most urgent need – to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, good support to navigation through infodemic is also urgently needed, since it is impossible to prevent its spreading. The key to every successful relation, including the one between institutions and citizens, is trust. “In times of global pandemic, it is based on three core components: accurate information, immediate protection (public health and services) and the prevention of negative economic consequences for the benefit of longer-term stability” (BiEPAG, 2020).

Economic, social and psychological changes caused by the pandemic are a new frame for media functioning, in which heightened emotions, fear and panic, action at all costs and moralizing – act as incentives to some media that thrive in such environments (e.g. tabloids), while putting

others on an unequal footing (clickbait) because they stick to core professional norms. Quality information provision, based on accuracy and adherence to journalistic standards, in new pandemic circumstances evidently requires several steps:

- new media literacy for the strengthening of every individual against infodemic, by developing skills needed for understanding news as a construct, and public awareness raising of the fact that verifiable news created by professionals, are of essential importance for individuals, for democracy and for the development of free and accurate informing in general;
- new definition of the term public interest, no longer in the context of post-truth, but in the framework imposed by the pandemic, when hidden political, economic or similar agenda openly “undermines public trust and confidence in journalism as a public watchdog, and may mislead the public by blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts” (Posetti, Ireton, 2020:9);
- codify, through self-regulation in media companies, an alternative to global and local technological surveillance of false news, so that journalists themselves could master appropriate tools and contribute to the development of their own skills needed in a digitalised world (“internal fact checking has to an extent led to the function now being assumed by the “fifth estate” of bloggers and other external actors who call out mistakes made by journalists” (Posetti, Ireton, 2020:9);
- public awareness raising of the role and importance of professional journalism, and the awareness raising of journalist on the importance of the inclusion of the public in their work, and the work of government bodies;
- additional regulation of the media in term of greater self-regulation in the traditional media, and the control and regulation of the modern media;
- the inclusion of the academic community in the creation of public policies on media, and education of journalists in the light of the new circumstances in which they now work and create.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on all the segments of society are impossible to grasp. Public policies are facing an enormous challenge to adapt to new reality caused by the pandemic. Regaining trust in the whole public sector is a serious task. The media sphere will inevitably be a part of that process. Professional journalism has got a new chance.

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Medijski okviri Covid 19 pandemije

Sažetak

Odavno je uočeno da je problem javnog informisanja sa polja prikupljanja i prodaje informacija, preusmeren na problem zaštite od dezinformacija, kao i na poteškoće da se proprate sve informacije objavljene o nekoj temi. Medijsko izveštavanje u doba krize kao što je pandemija, izoštrilo je i još snažnije markiralo razmere problema javnog informisanja. U radu iznosimo uverenje da novinarski profesionalci nisu dobro odgovorili svom osnovnom zadatku – da obezbede tačne, nepristrasne, pouzdane i za javnost važne informacije. Umesto toga objavljivane su informacije zasnovane na pretpostavkama, emocijama i stavovima u interesu određenih društvenih grupa, a ne od koristi za građane. Zabrana velikih skupova i događaja koji su uobičajeni izvori informacija, ograničnje kretanja ljudi i novinara, usmerenost na zvanične izvore sa ograničenim mogućnostima provere informacija, velika upotreba društvenih mreža, kao i opšta odstupanja od svakodnevnih redakcijskih rutina, uticali su na izostanak poštovanja osnovnih novinarskih načela. Umesto činjenica u medijima su dominirale interpretacije i emocije, što je u situaciji skromne opšte medijske pismenosti doprinelo širenju straha i nepoverenja u medije i institucije sistema. U radu se zalažemo za poštovanje Smernica Komiteta ministara Saveta Evrope o zaštiti slobode izražavanja i informisanja u vreme kriza (iz 2007. godine) i za opšte medijsko opismenjavanje, kako bi mediji efikasno obavljali svoju društvenu ulogu, a građani kritički procenjivali informacije koje su im dostupne, naročito u vreme kriza.

Ključne riječi: *pandemija, infodemija, novinarstvo, medijski okviri, medijska pismenost.*



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