

The practice of the Council of Media Ethics in N. Macedonia related to disinformation during COVID-19.

By Marina Tuneva

- In the period since the beginning of the pandemic the Council of Media Ethics in North Macedonia had to definitely adapt its work to the new circumstances. The presence of misinformation and disinformation circulating as a result of the crisis has been considered a very worrying phenomenon, and our Council had to start playing an important role in dealing with them. Our activities have been aimed at helping media take appropriate steps to verify information before it is published and make immediate and complete corrections when necessary.
- Promoting a public understanding of the difference between unprofessional and responsible journalism has been also in the focus of the Council's work. This has led to an initiative for establishing of a Registry of Professional Online Media whose goal is to contribute to the professional work in the online media, thereby enhancing their credibility as well as recognizing those who uphold standards in comparison to unethical media that cause damage to the reputation of professional online media.
- Since the outbreak of the first coronavirus case in our country, the Council of Media Ethics has been continuously reacting in public with statements, media alerts and press releases requesting prudent and responsible reporting concerning the crisis. The Council appealed to the media to act in a professional and ethical manner and to refrain from spreading untruths. There were frequent statements and reactions about various phenomena related to the threat to freedom of information and media freedom, as well as to negative media reporting practices. The Council also alerted the media to avoid serving as platforms for division among people and warned that the coronavirus must not be the 'weapon' to be used by any politician, whether in power or opposition, for political point scoring. The Council of Media Ethics has repeatedly reacted to attempts aimed at pressuring journalists in the execution of their professional duties.

- At the same time, the Council started working on encouraging media to play an important role in protecting human rights and in fostering their power to serve as a forum for inclusion of different voices in the public discourse. In this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have unfortunately witnessed how diversity has been increasingly used as a ground for scapegoating, spreading false accusations, conspiracy theories, and sometimes even hate speech against minorities. Hence, we felt the need to work harder to build trust with audience that may have strayed in the disinformation realm. This has been especially relevant in the context of fighting disinformation that fuels anti press sentiment. Taking into consideration that there is still a polarized media climate in the country which has displayed a mistrust of media outlets, we felt the need to encourage news outlets to deepen their coverage of people who feel they are not represented in the media and to reflect their reality. At the same time, we have been advocating at reporting that holds accountable all people in power and promote journalism that provokes a response from those in power.
- With a view to upgrading the existing ethical framework in relation to journalistic reporting on minority groups, but also to raise awareness among journalists the "[Guidelines for inclusive media reporting on Covid-19](#)" were produced, with the support of UNESCO. The Council also continued with its' tradition to reward professional stories on diversity inclusiveness. This year the process was supported by the OSCE Mission to Skopje.
- There were additional initiatives aimed at upgrading the ethical framework for media reporting. [Guidelines for professional, responsible and ethical reporting on coronavirus](#) were prepared as part of efforts to foster to help journalists distinguish between legitimate and reliable sources of information and speculation, half-truths and propaganda. The OSCE Mission to Skopje also supported the process of development of [Guidelines for online media reporting.](#)
- In the period when the authorities announced that they would monitor and punish people who publish misinformation on social media, i.e., untruths about the virus, as well as the media that cover the same misinformation, the Council, as part of the professional media community alerted the institutions that they should ensure

maximum transparency about the crisis caused by the pandemic and the economic crisis, and do not impose any restrictions on freedom of expression. It was clearly communicated that journalists must be provided with free access to information to be able to look critically at the government and all political actors and scrutinize their response to the crisis.

- Multisectoral cooperation among all stakeholders has been considered to be particularly important in combating pandemic and "disinfodemia", as well as in addressing the problem of hate speech and discrimination. Particularly important in this regards is the Network on Addressing Hate speech in the media.
- Initiatives were joined for media literacy as it can provide individuals with the critical thinking needed to tackle disinformation. In this regard, continuous education of the public is needed and the active cooperation between civil society and high education institutions is considered to be very important in helping the public recognize and develop resistance to misinformation and disinformation.
- Active networking and cooperation among the press councils and the professional media community also continued. We have been actively involved in processes of discussions and debates with the press councils in the region of South East Europe and Turkey on how to jointly address the problem of disinformation, fake news and propaganda. From our point of view, disinformation remains a wide-spread phenomenon and needs a collective effort in being addressed, by primarily involving the news industry, civil society, social media platforms and citizens themselves.