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Media in the Republic of North Macedonia: Between Objective Information and Fake News

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Abstract. Objectivity is a key element in professional journalism as opposed to fake news that increasingly affects the media space in the Republic of North Macedonia. The irresponsible behavior of some media, especially social media, contributes to creating a climate in which the public is misled. The trend of misinformation suggests exactly that, misuse of the media space in order to lead the audience to wrong conclusions. The misinformation easily won the media space, in a way removing the position of professional media research. Many studies point to the fact that fake news travels faster than the real news. Responsible media must be the link that will strongly influence powerful propaganda attacks. The public must not be misled. The media have a responsibility to accurately research and interpret the facts. The finished product of journalistic analysis must not contain elements of business, personal or political interpretations that will affect the objectivity of presenting the processed information.

Keywords: Informing¹, Fake², News³, Misinformation⁴

1 Introduction

The multiplicity of media functions expresses the social dimension that they have in society on one hand, while the media reality reflects the degree of democratization of the institutions of the system in a country, on the other. Despite the social conditioning, the media will be able to achieve socio-political, economic and cultural influence through a new quality of information.

-Only then does the communication action achieve its constant goal - understanding the event as well as communicative interaction - active involvement in the social dialogue, the process of public opinion, settlement and cooperation. (Кунчик, Ципфел, 1998:115)

This means that media content should be created based on professional standards and criteria, such as objectivity, accuracy, comprehensibility, complexity and pluralism of interests. The ideology and politicization of professional standards is the most common abuse by the media, but lately the emergence of political power, pressures of various kinds and influences of business and political groups, government and state institutions is becoming more common. The problematization of the media's information function is imposed by the new communication reality which is not only characteristic for the Balkan countries, but also for the media in Europe, as well as the American continent. The global treatment of the issue of fake news within the framework of creating principles for its overcoming is also in the focus of

European civic associations and professional media organizations, as well as in the policies of the European Union which most often implements media objectivity and information projects in candidate countries. The focus of European media policy is the integration of the

phrase - a well-informed citizen. This means that explaining the media information indicates accumulated knowledge, that is, experiences from similar events, and journalists according to a saying by Schneider (1984) - They are responsible for everything, for very little of it they are educated and they are not authorized with almost anything. (ibid: 162)

2 Media pluralism and objective information

When it comes to the issue of pluralism, that is, the propulsion for different points of view, the media in the Republic of North Macedonia understand it more as the transmission of a quantity of information, than the quality of information processing. This is noticeable through the dominance of the level of information, i.e. the presentation in relation to the level of analytical, i.e. the creation in the news. From the analysis of the daily informative shows on some televisions, it can be concluded that there is a greater representation of informative versus analytical genres. Especially on some televisions, the political coloration in the general and individual announcements of the articles is expressed. By using attributes, emotional expressions and comments, the informative element of the news gets a positive or negative media context instead of a neutral one. As for the analytical creation in the daily news programs, it often comes down to presenting the editorial attitude that reflects the editorial policy of a specific media house. There are no conflicting opinions and additional facts as well as information about the events that will objectively support the comment.

2.1 Politicization of Media Pluralism

When reporting socio-political events, some media in Macedonia use very inaccurate and unclear sources of information, unmarked and illustrative materials without clear origins as well as articles of conflicting nature where only one party is consulted. It is also common for unsigned texts, especially for topics with insufficiently defined sources and factual data. Analyses show that media often use unnamed or generally-defined sources to place unconfirmed information from the domestic scene, but also when informing about events that take place outside Macedonia. The mutual influence of politics and the media is, therefore, great. In today's conditions, the political reality in a society largely depends on the image that the public receives, regarding political events, through the media. On the other hand, the media are focused on political actors and occurrences due to the public interest in politics. As part of the usual journalistic practice and tradition, the media not only convey messages and information from political actors, but also analyze, select, comment, give their opinions and express opinions about them. They also invite and convey opinions and views of other competent persons and groups (experts, former public officials and functions, etc.) Regarding the analytical function, the media put the events and decisions in the political sphere under a constant analytical magnifying glass, which is most often realized as critical and thus contributes to continuous opposition to political factors. From this it can be concluded that political actors and the media are constantly striving for supremacy over the process of shaping public opinion. Such media reality can result in a situation where the media will give in to the pressures of political actors that can be imposed on the media and restrict or completely suppress the freedom of the media.

The process of shaping the media political-informative contents creates the media

reality that differs from the true reality. The continuous presence of a certain topic and its media treatment through various forms of media expression grows into Media Advocacy. In media terminology, it is defined as "... strategic utilization of the media for promoting a particular public initiative or position." (Lorimer, 1998: 67) When the media advocates for a certain issue and presents it to the public, they then

transform the specific issue that is being treated, into a public issue. It is especially important to emphasize the issue of the social and humanitarian aspect of the media message, i.e. the new information, its influence on the formation of public opinion and the intensity of the increase of the cognitive dimension in certain interest groups.

The selection of topics and values and questions about the facts determine the dimensions of media influence, and the construction of media reality in daily events contributes to the homogenization of media content. The media influence the determination and structure of the topics. The importance of the media is especially great when creating views on unknown topics, particularly if information on hitherto unknown issues from the social reality is repeated, while reducing the pluralism of information sources or there is an objective inability to follow the content in other media. The ideologically colored news directly influences the creation of attitudes that mean approaching or moving away from a political option as well as in the politicization of decisions, phenomena and processes, especially among neutral recipients or less educated audiences. The instrumentalization of information leads to the manipulation of public opinion. This means that media content is often chosen according to the possibility of their use (instrumental value) in group life. The syndrome of identification and projection with negative news related to the existence, life, personal safety and security of the audience increases the preconditions for their multiplication in reality and contributes to antisocial phenomena and changes in social psychology and in the realization of certain social roles. In addition, objective standards in the creation of media information can lead to an increase in factual information and knowledge without changing attitudes and behavior. - If there is little or no dissonance at all, we could not expect equal types of selectivity when exposing support sources and information sources. In fact, the motivation should be to seek support or new information or to be completely absent when dissonance does not exist." (Festinger, 1999: 185) Leon Festinger (1957), in general terms, presented the theory of consistency which explains the wide range of phenomena that are a consequence of the influence of society. The emphasis is placed upon the dynamics of overcoming the inconsistency between the cognitive elements that he characterizes as personal opinions of the individual, his knowledge of his own actions and the actions of others, as well as knowledge of the opposite opinions that others have. According to him, people want to overcome the feeling of insecurity, discomfort, frustration or stress by communicating, and he qualifies this phenomenon as cognitive dissonance. Festinger develops several theses within his theory according to which "... (1) there may be a dissonant or inconsistent relationship between cognitive elements; (2) the presence of dissonance causes pressure in order to reduce the dissonance and avoid increasing the dissonance; (3) the phenomena through which the action of those pressures is expressed, include changes in adoption, cognitive changes and careful exposure to new information and new opinions. (ibid: 185)

The statements received through the information function of the media inform and teach the recipients, and thus there may be a disagreement over what is received as a message from the mass media and the recipients' own opinion. This phenomenon in the sociology of mass communication is called cognitive dissonance, which can be discussed on two levels. The first is when the information function influences to reduce (decrease) or increase the dissonance between thinking and behavior. If the information helps to harmonize the attitudes and practical actions of the person, then it is a matter of reducing cognitive dissonance. The second level of cognitive dissonance refers to the dissonance between the contents of the message coming from the mass media and one's own opinion of the

recipients of the messages. Any information in the process of mass communication influences to harmonize or reduce this cognitive dissonance. The analysis of media practice shows that if information that originates from the mass media is in the function of a faster social progress, it is accepted very quickly and there is a reduction of cognitive dissonance. As historically determined, dynamic and deeply integrated category in the structure of a society, social consciousness is the most general framework from which the behavior of individuals derives. This implies that the behavior of the individual is never behavior in itself, but there is always some source in a certain system of values that are operationalized through the norms whose end result is a certain social consciousness. In modern societies, the means of mass communication are used to form, develop and change the contents of a particular worldview. The forms of creating public opinion about current phenomena and processes contribute to changes in the level of requirements, i.e. the criteria of the recipients, which can create a situation of feeling deprived of something, i.e. create a state of relative deprivation. It should be noted that this term indicates the assessment of their own social status according to relative criteria, that is, when comparing incomes, privileges, welfare and the like, with groups or individuals with whom the person is oriented. Given that absolute deprivation means a feeling of deprivation according to objective criteria of opinion, the difference between these two perspectives is significant in the formation of public opinion, especially in the era of cultural globalization, where the absolute is transformed into relative deprivation. Or more precisely, the global media, especially film, are less and less focused on creating productive-oriented values such as austerity, investment, positive valuation of entrepreneurship, and consumer orientations are becoming more widespread.

2.2 Controversies and Criteria of Objectivity

The problem of objectivity is increasingly imposed in the scientific debates within the media sphere, precisely with the political and democratic pluralism of the interests of the citizens. The relationship between media statements and the reality that determines the discourse of objectivity does not provide the answer according to which criteria are decided for the correctness of the presentation.

- Moderation as a criterion in terms of information refers to the overall content of a media, ie the interests that exist in a society, which within the same media compete in the struggle for public opinion. In such a struggle for the public, if the media should to remain neutral, there is a danger of gaining only a balance of already established interests. (Siljanovska, 2007: 88)

This shows that behind the notion that objective reporting is possible, is the idea that information can be presented so that recipients can form their own opinion. If objective information is free from prejudice and the facts are argued within it, then the question arises whether the term objectivity has the same meaning as honesty and balance. But, on the other hand, honest intentions in informing a media outlet do not mean objectivity if it does not represent facts, relevant sources of information and at least one side of one point of view - those who represent the stated position, opposing views and a neutral position regarding media coverage. In fact, a neutral stance means engaging a third party, that is, exploring the impact that that content has on the audience. Balanced reporting, which is one of the basic criteria in the BBC media work, means balancing the opposing views expressed, without determining the value of the objective, i.e. the truth in the story. If a parallel is made with the notion of objectivity in the scientific-theoretical discussion, it will be seen that it no longer refers to the connection between statement and reality, but objectivity is a feature of scientific action and indicates the intersubjective possibility of verification. Such a notion of objectivity can also be applied in the media, where objectivity is a hallmark of professional research and reporting, when trying to factually, non-partially and non-

manipulatively separate news from commentary.

Understandability as a media standard requires that they creatively and professionally translate events and problems into an understandable message accessible to all citizens, regardless of their educational level, occupation or professional competence, economic or political status. But understandability does not mean accuracy, unless 5 plus two questions are answered in one media story and the facts are not recognizable and verifiable. Complexity, on the other hand, is a comprehensive analysis of the conditions, events and problems as well as indicating the complexity and contradiction of the social processes that are informed. Given that society represents a dynamic, contradictory and conflicting whole composed of different social, political, ideological, national, religious and other social groups and communities, information from that aspect should cover all events in society. It must not be limited to certain events, selected contradictions, conflicts or focus only on certain groups or parts of the world. Objectivity in this case is questioned because of the selection of facts and values, i.e. the media framework creates a process of information reduction, the news is processed and due to the modification there is a lack of objectivity.

3 Misinformation and Fake News

The Media Literacy Index in Europe showed that in 2018 the Balkan countries are characterized by the least resistance to the phenomenon of post-reality, that is, our region is most receptive to fake news. Of the 35 European countries listed in the report, the Nordic countries are at the top, and North Macedonia is at the bottom of the list, i.e. it is the country with the highest "vulnerability" to fake news due to the lowest level of quality education and media freedom. Above it are Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Serbia.

Questions about facts and values in the communication reality impose a global trend of fake news in the media sphere that aims to misinform the public, manipulate public opinion and propagate certain views, opinions and views of political elites, business circles, the government or the opposition. Contrary to objective information, which is based on accuracy, truthfulness and complete presentation of facts with conflicting opinions from competent sources, false news is the product of conscious or deliberate violation of professional standards and norms in order to present a distorted picture of reality, phenomena and processes. This is done by the personal motives of the journalists, but most often, according to the analysis of the media practice in the Republic of North Macedonia, due to financial, economic or political pressures of individuals, groups or institutions, for which there are commissioned texts, media stories and intensified media propaganda, in order to strengthen political and economic power and abuse of party, state and other public functions.

If we start from the fact that everything that the media places in public represents construction, in its essence, then it is consequently followed that a limited number of selected information provide a limited media image regarding reality. Fake news is intended to harm the public, to divert attention, to cause confusion, and to defocus from real situations and problems.

4 Analysis of Fake News in the Macedonian Media Practice

The media sphere is flooded with various forms of fake news and fake information. The following are found in the media:

-Propaganda - information or set of information that is not objective and is used to influence the opinion or behavior of people in order to fulfill some agenda (political, corporate, etc.). Propaganda often uses an emotional rather than a rational message. There are many types and sub-types of propaganda, but the division into political, religious and commercial is common.

-Posttruth – represents a neologism (posttruth), which the Oxford Dictionary chose as the word of the year. This new term defines the circumstances in which public opinion is mainly shaped by emotions and personal beliefs, and not, as the dictionary says, by objective facts. The truth is especially important in the sphere of public opinion, because until a certain fact is confirmed, it remains only a private matter of the researcher.

-Twisting (SPIN) - twisting, ie. spinning is a propaganda technique, which means presenting the story according to the interest of one of the parties to which it suits.

-Bias - in the context of media literacy is an unfair imbalance in the reporting approach in favor of one party against another.

-Pseudo-events - these are events that have a marketing or PR function. They are usually organized for political purposes, with which politicians impose their agenda on the media.

-Pseudo-history - is a form of fake scientific research, which tries to distort or falsify historical records, often using methods similar to those used in historical research.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe for dealing with information manipulations, we should start from their classification according to content and intention. Examples of case analysis are taken from the Media Fact Finding Service

- Misinformation case analysis

Source - Title: "Be careful not to take paracetamol P / 500 - it contains a virus" Posted on: Social network "Facebook" (user profiles), date of publication: 29.9.2017.

Case – News spread on the social network "Facebook" that paracetamol tablets are being sold in North Macedonia, which are deadly. A user post said the virus was considered one of the most dangerous in the world, with a high mortality rate. Shortly afterwards, the "news" was taken over without additional verification published in the weekly "Republika" (without denial), as well as on the web portals "Skopje".

"24" and "Инфомакс" (with a statement from an expert, who expresses doubt about the veracity of the statement, but not an official denial from the Ministry of Health). The disinformation that spread through social networks about the deadly "paracetamol" was denied as false and unverified by the Ministry of Health, which came out on their "Facebook" fanpage, within the following day. "This post contains false and unverified information." "You can contact the Drug Agency for additional information by professionals."

Problem - None of the leading media in North Macedonia reported the announcement from the Ministry, nor did they apologize for reporting unverified and fake news. The "Facebook" page where the disinformation was originally posted has since been removed

and no longer exists. / Case: "Инфомакс" (with a statement from an expert, who expresses doubt about the veracity of the statement, but not an official denial from the Ministry of Health)

- *Case analysis for false information, i.e. disinformation*

Source - Title: "Congratulations. For the 15th anniversary, we are awarding 2 tickets for any destination for only 1 dollar. Retrieved from: Social network "Facebook" (user profiles), date of publication: 18.6.2018.

Case - A post was shared on social media with a link to a fraudulent website with a name similar to the low-cost Hungarian airline Wizz Air, which says two airline tickets are being offered for just \$ 1 to mark the airline's 15th anniversary. The news resounded among the citizens, who massively announced that they had bought tickets from "Wizz Air" and thanked for the promotion of their Facebook profiles. In the process of "buying" air tickets, citizens simultaneously entered personal data from the cards, thus allowing fraudsters to misuse their data for various purposes.

Problem – Those citizens who believed in the scam did not take into account that the airline's official website is wizzair.com, and the news website is wizzair.com fly.net. Within a short amount of time, some of the citizens who bought tickets discovered that it was a scam and a fake website, so they massively informed the banks to block their cards.

- *Malinformation case analysis*

Source - Title: "(Video) KATICA JANEVA ON PILLS IN THE PARLIAMENT: Does Katica Janeva have the capacity to contract in order to perform the function entrusted to her?" Media: Internet portal "Инфомакс", date of publication: 21.9.2016.

Case - A photo taken in the parliament was published on the internet portal "Infomax", during the presentation by the special public prosecutor for the report on the six-month work of the SPO. The photo shows Janeva taking a pill. The title and the accompanying text imply doubt in the working ability of Katica Janeva. It is unclear from the article what kind of pill it is (vitamin, antibiotic or something else). There is no answer to this question in the article, nor is an answer requested from the special prosecutor. Instead, speculation is offered to tarnish the reputation and discredit the SPO leadership.

Problem - Instead of information of public interest, politically biased messages are served in order to reduce trust in a representative of a state institution.

5 Conclusion

Facts play a major role in media representations of objectivity. The practice within the media profession shows that there are unwritten rules for a correct (objective) description of reality: all public facts should be correct; uncertainties should remain recognizable as such; reliability means completeness and balance; the author does not express his opinion; avoiding phrases; the expression of the opinion as a subject of the notification that should be marked as such, as well as not to use unfounded tendencies or facts for decoration or addition. Media standards enable the creation of critical thinking in

order to increase the cognitive dimension of the audience in order to form a public opinion that will enable a participatory role of both the media and citizens in all spheres of socio-political, economic and cultural life. Of particular importance are the freedom of expression and the independence of the media, which also reflect the degree of democratization of a society. On the other hand, a well-informed citizen in no way means only receives a lot of information, but also their proper use, comparing the thematic content with several specific media, detecting facts that are from relevant sources as opposed to fake news, as well as distinguishing the news from the comments, i.e. from the subjective interpretation of the information.

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