

University for Business and Technology in Kosovo

UBT Knowledge Center

UBT International Conference

2021 UBT International Conference

Oct 30th, 9:00 AM - 10:30 AM

Reporting in the age of pandemics: (the case of COVID-19), ethics, techniques, challenges and recommendations?

Musa Sabedini

University for Business and Technology - UBT, musasabedini@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledgecenter.ubt-uni.net/conference>

Recommended Citation

Sabedini, Musa, "Reporting in the age of pandemics: (the case of COVID-19), ethics, techniques, challenges and recommendations?" (2021). *UBT International Conference*. 237.
<https://knowledgecenter.ubt-uni.net/conference/2021UBTIC/all-events/237>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Publication and Journals at UBT Knowledge Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in UBT International Conference by an authorized administrator of UBT Knowledge Center. For more information, please contact knowledge.center@ubt-uni.net.

Reporting in the age of pandemics: (the case of COVID-19), ethics, techniques,
challenges and recommendations?

Musa Sabedini

UBT – Higher Education Institution, Lagjja Kalabria, p.n., 10000 Prishtinë, Kosovë
musasabedini@hotmail.com

Abstract. The history of COVID-19 has profoundly affected both, professional and personal aspect of journalists - from psychological trauma and refined investigations, to health risks for their families. When COVID-19 began to spread rapidly, journalists of all sectors didn't find it easy to report from the field, nor they had easy access to certain areas. All this psychological "terror" unavoidably resulted with consequences and negative effects in daily reporting routines, particularly to online reporting. Reporting for online media seemed a bit easier at first sight, however it was not easy at all to present the findings to the public. There were many slipups, unethical reporting, violation of privacy, pretentious headlines, just as largely unconfirmed information, presentation of statements by people who had no clues about the virus and pandemics. Keeping it short, we confronted a chaotic situation on the ground. Despite this situation, the media are supposed to support a proper and professional reporting. Of course, for most of the journalists reporting about pandemic was not their strength, however as time passed they became more sensitive and more motivated to improve and catch up with the new dynamics. Referring to my experience and the expertise of media professionals, in such and similar situations there should be a planning - an agenda to keep moving by learning the necessary lessons about pandemics and by improving practices of emergency reporting, and finally, finding some time for rest and recuperation. Therefore, in order to cover the emergency situations such as the COVID 19 pandemic, the online media in Kosovo were expected to act relying on sound and ethically challenging reporting practices. The print media, television, radio and online media in particular, have made fundamental mistakes, not to mention information coming from social media accounts, which provide no evidence on who stands behind them. Sensitive circumstances require high professionalism, maturity, knowledge, and courage to face with unexpected situations and avoid the spread of fake news, which may have extremely negative impact in society. Unfortunately, there is only a small number of journalists in Kosovo capable of performing such field tasks with integrity and professionalism. Therefore, the attention we should pay towards this phenomenon obliges us to be really good and smart professionals and to calmly face the way Covid-19 is reported. The editorial teams of online media, televisions, radios and newspapers must assign mature journalists with sufficient experience and knowledge about the danger that distorted or inaccurate information pose. It is not only the journalists who should be at their best, because the

statements of the institutionally responsible persons are also vital in this respect. This topic indeed addresses the reporting differences and nuances in reporting this global pandemic or other crisis situations.

Key words: Reporting, Pandemic, Covid-19, Ethics

Pandemic is not a wish list; journalists have professional and historic mission to accomplish when reporting

The situation with pandemic is not a wish list as it is a really emergency situation, which requires adequate behavior of journalists in respect to accuracy and professional competence.

Since the first detection of pandemic in Kosovo (13 March 2020) we had the opportunity to walk through a large amount of headlines, stories and analysis, which in some cases were professional and in some others were characterized by serious violations of professional ethics.

Headlines like: *"Terrible situation"*, *"The situation is getting out of control"*, *"Something is happening in the departments of infections"*, *"The virus is killing all"*, *"The virus will last until 2024"* and similar, not only are unethical, but do not meet even the minimum of reporting standard and professionalism.

The media should not dare to behave so comfortably and assign young and inexperienced journalists, let alone those who lack the basic knowledge of the dangers that this virus brings in. I am aware that there are journalists and media giving their best to cover the developments events professionally and trying to play a professional role, but this number is small because there are some others who often tend to report about COVID - 19 as if it were news of "showbiz".

How was the first COVID-19 case presented

Mëhill Martini, a 77-years old male from Stublla e Epërme, Municipality of Viti, was the person diagnosed with COVID 19 in Kosovo. All the media, without exception, criticized him and even landed many accusations of being inattentive by asking him embarrassing questions like: *"You attended a mass in Italy and did not speak about it"*, *"How was it possible for you to pass the airport without being tested"*, *"How do you feel in these moments when it is certain that you are the person to bring the virus to Kosovo"* and many other similar allegations attacking his personal integrity.

This kind of reporting style did not meet even the minimum of professional ethics, as the reporters failed to present the story professionally in the light of accuracy, thus distorting the initial statements of the victim.

Pictures, footages, recordings, and videos were terrible in the beginning as they stirred confusion, fear, uncertainty, and insecurity

When the pandemic started to spread, the media started going 'wild', too, by competing who is contributing more to the public information. At first, people who were affected by the virus were seen as dangerous, their private lives and lives of their families were attacked unprecedentedly. Photos from the Infectious Diseases Clinic showing people lying in the corridors, interviews with patients inside the wards and the poor conditions of the health staff, only added to all that insecurity in the public.

It became so obvious that the Kosovar media was facing many shortcomings in regard to reporting practices.

Videos and news stories with negative effects to public

Not only online media in Kosovo or the region have often given the wrong direction to pandemic reporting. In the US, many online media and private websites launched videos and stories showing people suffering from COVID-19. These materials were intended to convince the public of the danger posed by the virus, but instead the public was badly affected by this.

"Covid-19 exists. Put that word in your head before you put anything else," said Clotilde Armellini, 37, who was in poor health after being infected with Covid-19. "I am married and have two children. I am infected with Covid-19 "continued Clotilde, who lives in Pozzolo Formigaro, Alessandria and from her Facebook page appeals to everyone to be careful.

"I am lying here, and I am praying that the nurse will come soon to bring me the medicines because only if I take them can I calm down. My lungs are no longer working, they are filled with water...I would like to tear this mask off my face, but if I do, I will die because I can no longer breathe on my own." Clotilde throughout her video urges all people to be careful and respect all measures imposed by the government.

Faik Hoti, the spokesperson of the [Kosovo] Ministry of Health, shared an article published in the prestigious newspaper "The Wall Street Journal" reporting that the second wave of coronavirus has begun to spread in Europe from youngsters to elderly people.

Using his Facebook account, Hoti warned that the latest findings indicate that infection started to affect elderly people, often transmitted from younger members to older members within the family.

"Do not kill your grandparents by getting infected with Coronavirus and passing it on to them. "The second wave of Coronavirus in Europe has mainly affected young people who have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all", Hoti wrote. (Source: Daily Express, Pristina)

From the ethical perspective, it is quite debatable whether biased texts or headlines can positively affect the public.

The Global Investigative Reporting Network (GIJN) has provided several free webinars on investigative journalism during the pandemic. In one of these activities, experienced journalists Bruce Shapiro and Maria Teresa spoke to 166 investigative journalists and editors from 53 countries about strategies for staying physically and mentally healthy while covering the crisis.

Where we are heading to and how are we behaving in this sensitive situation?

The editorial teams of new media, but also of televisions, radios and newspapers must urgently assign mature, experienced and competent journalists to cover the developments related to pandemic as they are aware of the serious danger that distorted and inaccurate information pose to public.

It is not only the journalists who should do their best, because the statements of the institutionally responsible persons are also vital in this respect.

From the many news that circulated during the pandemic we have encountered biased headlines, unethical headlines, unprofessional stories and reports. In Daily Gazeta Express online edition, for example, I came across a very funny headline: "The 59-year-old who died yesterday from coronavirus was a member of the LDK", <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/59-vjecari-qe-vdiq-dje-by-coronavirus-was-a-member-of-ldkse/>

What we need to know and how to report?

Psychological preparation of every journalist before he/she goes out in field comes first. Further:

- Don't panic or spread unverified news
- Your reports should be balanced and with clear messages

- Always stay close to reliable sources
- Don't ignore the relevant institutions and don't distort their statements
- Do not put psychological and prejudicial titles
- Respect the privacy of infected people
- Show the highest respect and ethics; follow instructions of the Kosova Press Council
- Stay in touch with the nearest hospital centers at all times
- Follow statement of professionals, epidemiologists and similar experts who provide awareness messages about the current virus
- Focus on protection and prevention measures
- Support professional presentations of the white-collar workers and experts
- Take care of your families too and advise them accordingly
- Manage stress or euphoria coming from the assignment or the newsroom

These are only a few advises which you can benefit from. A wrong word or an unprofessional reporting may well kill more than the disease itself.

COVID-19 Tips

*Source: Rowan Philp - Global Investigative Journalism Network**

Reporters covering disasters on the ground face the same responsibilities: they should not cause additional harm to affected people; they need to take care of their physical and mental health. However, in the case of coronavirus, reporters as well as their audiences and resources are fully involved in the challenges and anxiety associated with the pandemic. They face an additional problem as they need to attempt not to hurt their relatives and families when they return home.

Bruce Shapiro says that studies indicate that the journalists are generally able to cope with the trauma they see at work. The prolonged nature of the pandemic is manifested with challenges and stressful situations that can only be managed with proper planning.

"There will be a period of several months of stress and anxiety combined with a continuous mindset of not knowing how this story will end and thinking about how the people we love will cope with it," Shapiro stated.

"There are domestic stresses that are unique in this age of physical distance, working from home and isolation. The brain needs time to rejuvenate and we need to stay active, plan our days, find some time for personal care through exercises or yoga to reduce our

*Rowan Philp is a journalist and winner of several awards. Currently based in Boston, Philip has been editor-in-chief and head of the London office for the South African Sunday Times for 15 years.

biological stress...We are talking a lot about lowering the infection curve, but we as journalists need to think about lowering the stress curve, too" said Bruce Shapiro, adding that reporters need to distinguish factors they can and cannot control, and rely on colleagues and reliable sources of information.

"We need to gain control over the small elements of this prevailing global crisis by doing our job using a proper plan. This is something that investigative journalists do the best."

Finding the focus

Ronderos says her three strategies for building sustainability include increased focus, collaboration and continuity – so as to show your audience and your mind that the world is bigger than a virus.

"You have to understand what can and cannot be done, and just let go," Ronderos says. "Talk as much as you can with colleagues and editors. Our prevailing instinct is to win by having the news first, but at this point we need for more cooperativeness. Finish those non-virus related stories, prepare them, and whenever you have time, publish non-pandemic related stories. Watch the government and hold them accountable in other areas, too, as it allows people understand that the life will move on. "Many people, even my family and friends, believe they are powerless; that there is nothing they can do about this crisis," Ronderos says, adding that "we, as journalists, need to do certain things about it." "It will make us feel better."

Of course, reporters also carry a special burden as "we dive into images and documents that carry a heavy traumatic burden," Shapiro says.

Family matters

Apart from following the recommended protection measures, such wearing facemasks, gloves, and hand washing, Ronderos states that reporters should actively share the professional instructions with their family members and need to be transparent about their reporting practices.

"Make sure your families know that you are following the instructions of authorities such as World Health Organization or the Committee for Protection of Journalists and that you are using all these resources to protect yourself," she said.

In order to minimize the risk, Shapiro emphasizes that we should choose to follow the activities deemed necessary during reporting, thus informing the family members of what we are doing.

Let's be honest here, social interaction and reporting contains risks to personal safety, as we don't want to become spreaders of the virus. It is important to evaluate when you can report from a certain distance.

Ronderos says home-quarantined reporters can learn and practice open source reporting. "You can use this period to learn more about open source investigative journalism."

In a previous interview, Dr. Cait McMahon, director of Dart Asia, believes that reporters face risks of psychological damage in three phases of their work - as witnesses of traumatic events, while interacting with victims, and while transmitting their experiences as they report.

McMahon suggests that reporters conducting interviews in the morning are likely to have a higher emotional load as the energy levels are the highest. They should take a break after the interview and, if possible, avoid transcribing them immediately. Also, the reporters need to keep the social distance during the face-to-face interviews, as eye contact can compensate the lack of physical one.

Recommendation for reporting COVID-19 stories

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kosova Print Media Council (KPMC) called on all print and online media and broadcasters to adhere to the ethical standards when reporting about the developing stories.

KPMC called for information on the spread of the pandemic to be verified by official sources, so as to avoid spreading panic among the population.

In the cases of inaccurate news, the KPMC called on the media to publish denials and materials which denounce the false information as untrue.

KPMC called for the strict protection of patients' privacy and under no circumstances to reveal the identity of those infected.

In cases when victims wish to make statements, the media should ensure that their identity is not revealed.

Photographs and videos illustrating the virus should not expose images of ordinary people.

KPMC called on the media to publish as much as possible information containing professional advices for preventing the spread of the virus.

The KPMC requested from the media to refer only to scientifically credible sources and consequently avoid statements made by non-professional staffers.

In this situation, the KPMC calls on the media to strictly respect the ethical principles of the KPMC code of conduct.

Reporting the truth

As stipulated by the Code, the journalist should strive to find the factual truth, and consequently take all necessary steps to reach the truth.

Reference to 'ghost' and unreliable sources is in contradiction with the requirements of the Code. As stipulated in the KPMC's Code of Conducts reporting should be based on identifiable sources of information. Of course, the sources need to be protected when deemed professionally appropriate, however the secondary native information that make a certain information truthful must be provided.

Single source-based information without making no attempt to contact the relevant institutions as a second source of information, is unfair and as such must be avoided. Apart from spreading fear and panic, publication of news containing tips for prevention and protection from COVID-19 with making a single reference to professional authorities poses danger for public health and security.

Privacy

During reporting journalists should aim not to interfere or invade the privacy of persons involved in their reports. In the attempts to cover as many cases as possible, journalists must be careful not to disclose detailed health information about the persons we report on, except in cases when they have no objections of exposing or in cases when there is a public interest depending on the public profile of the subject.

Child protection

Referring to COVID - 19 information available to date, it is certain that children are not immune to the virus at all, and that they, too, can be well affected.

Beyond the usual attention that journalists should pay when reporting in general, reporting involving children and juveniles should be extremely careful. Journalists should

make all efforts to preserve the identity of children and juveniles by avoiding disclosing information that may lead to their identification.

Protection of copyrights

Beyond the reporting circumstances on a daily basis, protection of copyrights in cases when we report on developments that jeopardize public health and that may incite fear and panic, takes other dimensions.

Consequently, it is essential that the journalists and the media reveal the source of information they publish by respecting copyright and true authorship, thus giving readers the opportunity to assess the credibility of the published news.

The KPMC reminds us of the seriousness of situation the entire globe is facing with and the importance of providing fair and accurate information to public. It is our duty to take all necessary steps to ensure a comprehensive, trustful and accurate reporting.

The KPMC called on the responsible institutions, especially on the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Public Health, to enhance their communication practices, increase their public appearances and statements for media, so as to narrow the rooms for the spread of fake news that may incite fear and panic.

The spread of COVID-19 itself is a cause for great public concern, however reporting practices of several media has contributed to intensification of growing concern in a way that has no ethical grounds. Spreading of fake during an epidemiologic emergency may result with serious consequences. On the contrary, refraining from publication of unverified news and prevention tips will certainly reduce the undesired effects.

Don't allow to be deceived by online disinformation

Check out these issues when searching social media:

Source. Think and analyze what lies behind a certain information. Check the origin of the website or social network profile, Check the basic information, such as names and surnames.

History. Does a certain source have any agenda? Find out what kind of topics it usually covers and whether it promotes a biased perspective.

Evidence. Pay attention to the information details to understand whether it is supported by credible evidence.

Emotions. Does the source of information is emotionally related to a certain standpoint? Check for sensational, inflammatory, or divisive rhetoric

Pictures. A picture is worth a thousand words. Check out what messages a certain illustration tends to convey and whether the source uses pictures for grabbing readers attention.

The pandemic gave us the opportunity to meet experts, virologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists, chemists, pharmacists, politicians, etc., each assessing of them giving assessments and offering alternatives in own styles. Most of them nearly failed because the epidemiologic situation left no room for any precise predictions.

In this endless tunnel that we are driving on I will bring the recommendations of a senior expert of infectious diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci. Despite reckless and often hasty statements, the US President Donald Trump and the public believed in his expertise.

Recommendations of Anthony Fauci: Media should take of public health, too.

Understanding the sensitivity of statements by competent people in the style: "Autumn begins with the second phase of the pandemic", or "The country is preparing for the second wave" and many similar headlines terrorizing the public, Fauci decided to make a step forward in his public statements.

Fauci suggested that the phrase "Second Wave" should be avoided and instead use more active phrase, such: "Are we prepared for the challenges of autumn and winter?"

Fauci's statement really fits in well with the media and their often urgent and disgusting reporting. Online media in particular, must learn and adapt to a reality that has been created for a year now. The media should care about the health of the population more than the doctors and the health sector itself. The public needs some soft news, fair reporting, educative messages, professional advices, and so on, rather than pretentious texts and headlines that negatively affect the psychologic condition of the population.

When reporting about certain developments, the media should carefully choose the language and become extremely careful of what is published and said. It is crucial for the media to have a reporting style and agenda stringent to the professional criteria and standards.

We often think that our experts or those deemed competent to give professional statements are well-prepared and honest in what they say, however some of them have

chosen to use an extreme language. There is nothing worth from information perspective when media interview unauthorized officials, such as nurses or politicians.

Therefore, the media representatives have the obligation to be responsible, prepared to the highest possible levels, so that the autumn and winter challenge becomes easier and brings a fair and professional reporting. When the media report fairly, accurately, and objectively, it is up to the public to assess what to select and in what to believe.

We've have made different and contrary reports during the pandemic. Citizens often get nervous and react to our contrary reports and they are often forced to choose either untrusted sources, newspapers or TV and Radio as channels of information and communication.

Why? Because some online media have often exceeded the limits of professional ethics. Therefore, become part of professional reporting, become part of healthy and "sweet" and accurate reporting for public and your audience.

Literature

Rowan Philp | Global Investigative Journalism Network

Recommendations listed here are based on suggestions provided by international organizations, such as: Poynter, First Draft, Journalist's Resource, Open Notebook, Reframe, World Health Organization (WHO), KPMC Pristina, experienced journalists, scientists, and experts.