

ALEKSANDAR M. FILIPOVIĆ*
Faculty of Economics and Engineering Management
Novi Sad
ŽELJKO BJELAJAC**
Faculty of Law for Commerce and Judiciary
Novi Sad

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THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN DISAFFIRMATION OF SECURITY CULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Summary: In this paper, the authors analyze the confusion created during the pandemic, and confront the baseness of a state to even partially suspend “the right of the public to know” during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, with the obligation of that state to always and unconditionally allow the mass media to inform the public about everything that is a public interest. Through question who determines what is the public interest in informing about COVID-19, the authors comment on possible conflict of interest of states and health authorities on one and citizens on another side, and in what measure such conflict of interest results in ignorance of citizens about what to do to decrease the risk from the disease, and doing so disaffirm the security culture during the pandemic. The authors also consider the role of mass media without which a state cannot communicate with its citizens, nor it can establish a sustainable security culture of its citizens necessary to prevail the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: pandemic, state, media, journalism, information, security culture

Introduction

A pandemic of any disease is the most serious problem that can affect a country's health system. The global health authorities and the health authorities of regulated countries, are permanently preparing for the outbreak of a possible epidemic. If an epidemic breaks out, pre-prepared systemic protocols are initiated, which, in addition to health care, also contain actions of the state and citizens in a large number of other areas. Informing citizens is one of the most important areas. Information should, on the one hand, prevent panic and mass hysteria or depression, which can occur in the event of illness and death of a large number of citizens. On the other hand, the information should not deviate from its ethical framework. Individuals and bodies authorized to communicate information at the time of the epidemic must

* sasha.filipovic@gmail.com

** zdjbjelajac@gmail.com

ensure that the information is true and complete and that they talk to citizens through the media in the optimal function of affirmation of the safety culture of the population and minimizing any damage.

As it was *in flagranti* visible around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic information system consists of two factors. One is health authority that is empowered to monopolize and often untransparently tells the data relevant to the epidemic, while the other factor are public information media who broadcast that information to citizens, generally without a possibility to check the veracity and completeness of the information told by health and other authorities through analytical and investigative journalistic procedures. We could observe two large behavior groups of countries and their mass media during the COVID-19 pandemic. One group of countries achieved complete symbiosis and harmony of health authorities and the media on principle *gens una sumus*, where the public interest is not auctioned and where the country and the public are combatting the same opponent in unison. The other group of countries, generally authoritarian, with poor and relatively undeveloped health systems, cannot establish modern and efficient protection of population from COVID-19. To prevent an adverse public reaction and a drop in political ratings that could lead to the loss of political power, the executive branch often disavows health experts and institutions, and political leaders usurp the right to inform citizens about the details of the epidemic and the measures prescribed by health authorities, and they often do it personally. So the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, personally denied the danger from COVID-19 daily, while claiming that no person died from coronavirus in Belarus, nor will they. Additionally, statistics on the number of infected and diseased were not available to the public, and journalists were prohibited from taking the statements from the medical workers and from investigating what is happening in the hospitals¹.

The first victim of such approach to collective security and security culture is the truth about the state of the nation in regard to COVID-19 which automatically leads to suppression of safety measures and greater degree of disease spread. Deeming that the lesser number of infected and deceased indisputably proves that their rule is better and they are more successful rulers, the leaders of such states tell false numbers to their citizens. The data shared by the individuals or their crisis headquarters are often inaccurate, and the number of cases and deceased is drastically decreased. On the other side, such countries are relatively open, so the true data comes to media which tell them to the public as much as they can and may, which altogether creates unprecedented confusion and uncertainty of citizens in the true state of the disease spread and true danger they face. Both the executive and health authorities lose their authority and trust, and media and journalists are proclaimed guilty for that and persecuted. Still, the complementary interdependence and supplementation, meaning, joint work of health authorities and the media during the COVID-19 pandemic are necessary in itself. Both have masses of frightened and disoriented citizens to inform and to shape their behavior in accordance to proce-

¹ Tatsiana Melnichuk, „Coronavirus: Belarus WW2 parade defies pandemic and upstages Putin“, *BBC News*, 09.05.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52574749>, 09/08/20

dures prescribed by global health authorities, generally the WHO, and in the best interest of the citizens themselves. That is why they have to cooperate, coordinate their activities daily, to correct and warn each other.

The role of the media in the contemporary society

The mass media are fully integrated with modern society and it cannot do without them. The individual citizen, social organizations, as well as business, rely on the mass media to inform them about what is happening in the community, the nation and the world in general. Hence, the mass media form a vital link in the information system, which encompasses all levels of society and social administration². Mass media are social institutions that operate within certain disciplines, rules, rights and policies that employ a characteristic mix of qualified staff, who adhere to certain procedures in gathering information, in order to create material for visually, auditory or conceptually oriented media. They are participants in the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics of social power. A number of other theorists describe the mass media whose goal is to inform, persuade, entertain and sell. But all four elements are rarely present within a single story, advertisement, text or information³. Although the mass media are a synthesis of many different factors and professions, in the sense of this paper, the focus is on the informative function of the media. Media were originally created and developed because of the informative function, while all the other functions, such as entertainment or educational, were added in various phases of their development. Naturally, there are media that do not perform the informative function and hence do not employ journalists. In the current hypersaturation of media space there are many such media, and they performed an important secondary role during the pandemic in providing content to citizens in the conditions of limited movement and so represented a source of normalcy. On the other hand, media whose primary function is informative one had a crucial role during the pandemic, and they faced a generational challenge. The extent to which they have responded to this challenge is a question that corresponds to the question of how well journalists do their job during a pandemic, because journalism is the foundation of the news media. It should also be said that the entire spectrum of news media today includes social media, through which the majority of communicating is performed in modern times. While traditional media, print and electronic, have procedures and control over the dissemination of information, there is no such control on social media, so a disturbing number of inaccurate information has been spread through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Here we find a correlation between the lack of investigative journalism and the huge amount of misinformation - if journalists did their job the way they normally do, citizens would be better informed, making it harder to believe the information they came across through social media, and confusion would be lesser. Journalism is, by the way, one of the few human activi-

² Roland Lorimer (1998), *Masovne komunikacije*, Clio, Beograd

³ Željko Bjelajac, Boro Merdović (2018) „Senzacionalizam u medijima kao uzrok destabilizacije politike suzbijanja kriminaliteta“, *Kultura polisa*, god. XV (2018), br. 35, 289-300

ties that, depending on how it treats truth and morality, can be very useful or immeasurably harmful. At its best, journalism is an important and useful creation of the human mind and hands, one of the foundations of democracy. Journalists provide citizens with information and analysis, facilitate communication within society and, to a significant extent, enable self-government. The public regularly receives its daily amount of reliable information that ultimately helps individuals achieve their place in society and, more broadly, in the global community. The information shows injustices, essences, power struggles, disasters, achievements and private interests. Citizens, watching the main news in the media, are aware of their common or competitive values. Through journalism, the society monitors the state of its institutions and its future and reacts when necessary. Such journalism is essential for democracy because a person cannot self-constitute his own meaning and purpose if they do not have complete and accurate information about events beyond his scope. They must know what happened, how and under what circumstances. Work, health, future, life often depend on that knowledge⁴. The media are also an instrument for the promotion of social space in the modern world⁵. Although the original *raison d'être* of the media was to inform citizens, it soon turned out that the media can misinform as much, and that they often do that intentionally, engaged, in accordance with political or other goal of an individual or groups that control the media. The mass media are, therefore, an unavoidable factor of changes in society, which, on the other hand, change the role of the media. Media and media contents help individuals determine themselves and their behavior in relation to others – in a way they are presented in the media. Thus, the media help an individual to position and determine themselves in relation to others and to orient themselves better in real social situations⁶. The media can have another function, and that is the function of an active role in imposing the public, political, social, psychological, and other value positions on citizens. In skilled hands, the media can effectively shape public opinion. Whether that influence will be positive or negative, whether it will be for the benefit of all elements of society, or only the chosen ones, it depends only on the maturity of a society and its democratic institutions.

Why the investigative journalism failed?

What kind of investigative journalism is that, and has it really failed before the coronavirus and the unsustainable pressure of the state authorities? In the modern world, there are many segments of society that want to keep their work in the shadows, to hide it from the eyes and consideration of the public. It is not only the

⁴ Željko Bjelajac, Aleksandar Filipović (2018) „Uticaj masovnih medija na degradaciju savremenog društva”, in: Uticaj masovnih medija na degradaciju savremenog društva, Željko Bjelajac i Aleksandar Filipović (eds.), posebno izdanje, *Kultura polisa*, 9-21

⁵ See: Aleksandar Filipović (2016): *Paradigma kulturološkog pozicioniranja video igre*, doctoral dissertation, Fakultet dramskih umetnosti, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu

⁶ Željko Bjelajac (2015) „Mediji, supkultura i kriminalitet“, *Kultura Polisa*, god. XII (2015), br. 27, 121-134

state with its apparatus of coercion and force (army, police, secret services), diplomacy, large corporations. An incredible number of organizations and individuals want to keep their business a secret, the enumeration of which would be completely meaningless. In the modern world, this aspiration is opposed by one of the most important principles of public life and the irreplaceable and inalienable foundation of democracy - a noumenon as important as a categorical imperative⁷, a principle called "the right of the public to know" and investigative journalism as an effective postulate of that right. Investigative journalism is a segment of the journalistic profession in which a journalist, or a group of them, as holders of a "social license"⁸, based on legal journalist research, writes a journalistic text, usually an article, or an appropriate journalistic product, in the case of electronic media. Journalistic research must be legal, which means that the journalist must introduce himself to the interlocutor or institution, let him know that he is doing journalistic research and that all knowledge gained during the interview, meaning research, can be made public. During the research, the journalist must investigate and offer answers to a set of common journalistic questions (who, what, where, when, how and why) and offer evidence that "beyond any reasonable doubt" confirms the allegations in the text. Journalistic research is always inspired by a social problem of a significant level, most often related to crime, corruption, trafficking in weapons, people or narcotics, pedophilia, or some other acute form of social pathology. The usual structure of journalistic work that emerges after the completion of research⁹ is to begin with a description of the condition or problem. The second part of the work is the so-called "diagnosis", in which the journalist describes and proves how and why the problem arose, who is responsible for the problem, etc. In the third part, the journalist, starting from the social license, and, referring to unambiguous authorities, proposes therapy, meaning measures and actions that individuals and social factors should take in order to solve the problem that was the topic of the research. Investigative journalists are, due to the right and opportunity to reveal secrets in the name of society, natural opponents of the most powerful social structures. We mentioned crime, corruption, arms trafficking, etc., but that by no means means that the topic of research is only criminals. The prominent opponents of investigative journalists are international corporations and organizations and state governments that are often at the top of a phenomenon called organized crime. Every year, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) announces the number and names of journalists killed for their in-

⁷ The categorical imperative is the ethical concept of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant gives several formulations of the categorical imperative: act according to that maxim for which you may wish to become a general law; always treat humanity in yourself and other beings always as a goal, and never as a means; always act according to the maxim that you would determine if you were a legislator in the kingdom of goals.

⁸ The social license represents the ontological status of a journalist as a worker employed in the media of public information, who acts in his journalistic work "in the name and in the interest of society", representing and defending the broadest interests of the public. Just as courts and judges judge "in the name of the people," journalists do their work on the basis of a social license, that is, "in the name of the public."

⁹ Rule advocated by Sergije Lukac, a longtime professor and head of the journalism department at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade

vestigative work. The number of journalists killed annually is rarely less than a hundred, and the worst was in 2006, when 155 journalists were killed. In principle, they were all investigative journalists on assignment.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, and later the pandemic, the World Health Organization noticed that there was a lot of misinformation in informing about COVID-19, which reduces the success of the containment of the disease, so it insisted on suppressing misinformation together with other related organizations. In order to combat misinformation, intergovernmental organizations such as the WHO or UNESCO have established fact-checking tools and created websites that provide reliable information on pandemics.¹⁰ In a media interview in mid-April 2020, Saorla McCabe, a UNESCO program specialist, insisted on transparency and investigative journalism as protection against misinformation. "Governments must ensure a high level of transparency and fully guarantee the right of citizens to access information, including through websites and hotlines that provide official data and advice. Providing access to reliable pandemic information, such as updated statistics, protective measures, and formal guidelines on how citizens should behave, can minimize the risk of people falling victim to misinformation. In times of crisis, governments must increase transparency in accordance with legislation and policies on access to information. It is important to note that independent professional journalism can play a key role in debunking myths by disseminating accurate, factual information about the crisis. Therefore, freedom of the press is an indisputable blessing and should be protected in every possible way - especially in this period, and not suppressed. The independent press can successfully counter misinformation and unverified rumors. Finally, the key focus should be on media and information literacy"¹¹.

From the very beginning, from the first announcement of the appearance of COVID-19 in China, journalists have played a key role in reducing the risk posed by the virus. They identified new hotspots, provided information on safeguards, denied misinformation and helped governments establish themselves as responsible for virus containment policies. However, the coexistence of the government and the media was short-lived and the reality showed different behavior of the governments in all parts of the world. Even in the age of the coronavirus, the authorities generally perceived the media and their journalistic research as opponents, not only opponents of the government, but often "enemies of the people" whose writing harmed citizens and diminished the government's efforts to defeat the coronavirus. The matrix is ideologically typical and is repeated whenever the government thinks that it is in danger of losing political power. The state authorities, wanting complete control over the flow of information, did not want an intermediary in the transmission of information about COVID-19. Journalists have become undesirable. The highest representatives of the government disavowed even the largest medical authorities of

¹⁰World Health Organization, „Digital tools for COVID-19 Contact Tracing“, 04.06.2020 https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Contact_Tracing-Tools_Annex-2020.1, 07/08/20

¹¹ Elena Vapnichnaya, "Interview: Openness of the authorities, conscientiousness of the media, information literacy of citizens - this is what needs to be countered with disinformation about the coronavirus", *UN News*, 16.04.2020, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/04/1376212>, 08/08/20

their country, if they were not part of the team for manipulating information (conflict between Trump and Dr. Fauci)¹². Authorities often resorted to orchestrated press conferences in which loyal government associates reported manipulated information, without the possibility for investigative journalists to ask questions and obtain answers. By attacking journalists, governments undermined the ability of the entire system to respond to COVID-19 and thus violated the security culture. Clear examples of abuse of power by the authorities are the arrests and prosecutions of journalists who wrote about COVID-19. Similar events have been reported from several countries, as well as less violent forms of harassment or intimidation, such as the arrival of police at the apartment door, various bans, etc.

The correlation between the media dysfunction and security culture disaffirmation

The correlation is flagrant. With social problems in which a large number of citizens are involved, even the entire population, such as in a pandemic, without the strong support of the entire public information sector, there is absolutely no implementation of security measures, and therefore collective and personal security. Wise states and wise politicians know this, so they nurture their system of public information and encourage it for the highest professional achievements, but not all statesmen are wise. In the previous chapter, we tried to state a certain dysfunction of the media regarding writing about COVID-19. The media around the world have shown astonishing and unusual dysfunction. Why?

The experiences of a large number of countries and the media in them indicate that the reason for the media's dysfunction is, first of all, the elementary fear of journalists and editors of government repression, and even the fear for life. Another reason could be the permanent and systemic obstruction to access to information on the epidemic by the authorities. Many states have banned journalists from accessing data on the number of infected and deceased. Other states have banned doctors and other medical staff from giving information to journalists and from contacting the media in any way. Third countries have proclaimed free access to information, but have set up barriers in the chain of communication that resulted in discouragement of medical professionals from cooperating with journalists and the media. "The pandemic offers dictators, and democracies alike, the opportunity to abuse¹³", Florian Bieber, a professor at the University of Graz, wrote for *The Foreign Policy*, and suggested that when the virus recedes, many countries will be far less democratic than they were before March 2020, and that some regimes are likely to double down on their authoritarian practices and take advantage of the state of emergency to con-

¹² Quentin Fottrell, "Trump vs. Fauci: The president says, 'He was wrong'; the doctor responds, 'I don't regret anything I said'", *Market Watch*, 21.07.2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/trump-on-faucis-early-response-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-he-was-wrong-fauci-disagrees-i-think-im-pretty-effective-2020-07-19>, 06/08/20

¹³ Florian Bieber, "Authoritarianism in the Time of Coronavirus", *Foreign Policy*, 30.03.2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/authoritarianism-coronavirus-lockdown-pandemic-populism/>, 12/08/20

solidate power. „Initially, populist and autocratic leaders were ill-prepared for the pandemic. A disdain for science and expertise, combined with nepotism and neglect of state institutions, including health care, made governments such as those of U.S. President Donald Trump, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro more vulnerable“¹⁴. Bieber points to examples in Serbia and Turkey, where pro-regime media gave voice to so-called experts who claimed that their population was genetically protected from infection. French President Emmanuel Macron has dramatically said that France is "at war", liberal democracies, including Italy, Germany and Austria, have taken unprecedented measures to monitor citizens, such as monitoring their movements via mobile phone data. In Montenegro, the government has even announced the names and addresses of citizens who should be in quarantine. In such a situation, with so many threats to freedom and even the life of journalists, it is difficult to remain a professional and continue with persistent professional work.

Attacks on journalists because of their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic have been reported around the world. Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Frontiers), in its annual report "Media Freedom Index 2020"¹⁵ warned of problematic trends regarding media freedom, especially when it comes to journalists writing about the coronavirus. Reporters Without Borders has condemned the censorship imposed by China on certain scientific publications about the coronavirus, which could deprive the world of the necessary information in the fight against the pandemic. Amnesty International recalls that the right to timely and accurate information is a fundamental condition for the effective exercise of the "right to health"¹⁶. In the case of COVID-19, this means that everyone has the right to access all available information on how the virus has spread, as well as the measures they could take to protect themselves. But according to the organization, governments around the world have arrested and imprisoned journalists and other media workers for sharing just these basic information¹⁷. Amnesty International particularly stresses the case¹⁸ of the Russian media *Novaya Gazeta* (Новая газета), which published an article by journalist Elena Milashina (Елена Милашина) on April 12 in which she criticized the Chechen authorities for their response to the pandemic¹⁹. Chechen leader Ram-

¹⁴ *ibid*, 12/08/20

¹⁵ Reporters Sans Frontiers, "2020 World Press Freedom Index", <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>, 13/08/20

¹⁶ The right to health is a set of legal rules according to which everyone has the right to a standard of living that ensures the health and well-being of both the individual and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, necessary social services, and the right to unemployment insurance, illness, disability, widowhood, old age and other cases of loss of means of subsistence due to circumstances independent of his will. By the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on December 10, 1948, at the UN General Assembly, all its members, including the Republic of Serbia, undertook to ensure that no person is deprived of that right

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Global: Crackdown on journalists weakens efforts to tackle COVID-19, 01.05.2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/global-crackdown-on-journalists-weakens-efforts-to-tackle-covid19/>, 12/08/20

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 12/08/20

¹⁹ Елена Милашина, "Смерть от коронавируса — меньше зло", *Новая газета*, 12.04.2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/12/84851-smert-ot-koronavirusa-menshee-zlo>, 13/08/20

zan Kadyrov has previously claimed that people who transmit the infection to another are "worse than terrorists" and that "they should be killed". Milashina warned that these comments led people to hide their symptoms out of fear. In response, Kadyrov posted a video on his Instagram profile threatening the journalist, and called on the Russian government and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to "stop those non-humans who write and provoke our people." Authorities in Moscow said Kadyrov's threat was "very emotional but nothing unusual happened"²⁰. However, only three days later, the Russian regulatory body Roskomnadzor, at the request of the Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, ordered Novaya Gazeta to remove the disputed text²¹, which they did. In Venezuela, journalist Darvinson Rojas spent 12 days in prison after reporting on the spread of the virus in the country. Two journalists of a local website „Ses Kocaeli“²² were arrested in Turkey after they published an article about two COVID-19 related deaths in a local hospital. In India numerous journalists were called to report to police to explain their stories. Journalists have been prosecuted for reporting on COVID-19 in many other countries including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Bangladesh, Palestine and others. Ana Lalić, a journalist of Nova S portal was arrested and detained for alleged raising panic and alarming the public, after the Clinical Center of Vojvodina filed a report against her because of an article about the lack of protective equipment for medical workers in KC Vojvodina²³. All of these examples from different parts of the world provide a partial answer to the question of why investigative journalism failed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Strict control of information by states in conjunction with the vulnerability of journalists that would be a result of reporting against the will of the system, even in situations where those systems have the best intentions in terms of combating infectious diseases, as well as restricted movement and monitored communications in certain states have discouraged journalists from such endeavors. It is also important that such an environment has created fear among potential credible sources, without whom it is not possible to conduct journalistic research. The dysfunction of the media has certainly contributed to the weakening of the collective security of the population and diminished its ability to organize itself in defense against disease. The flagrant lack of necessary information prevented the best response of the population to the infection. The state authorities defended themselves and their government, strengthened their regimes, but, on the other hand, caused the

²⁰ “Весьма эмоционально, но ничего необычного: Песков — об угрозах Кадырова “Новой газете”, *Новая газета*, 16.04.2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/04/16/160750-vesma-emotsionalno-no-nichego-neobychnogo-peskov-ob-ugrozah-kadyrova-novoy-gazete>, 13/08/20

²¹ Reporters Sans Frontiers, „Коронавирус: подчиняясь требованию Рамзана Кадырова, российские власти подвергли цензуре статью с критикой репрессивного кризисного менеджмента Чечне”, 17.04.2020, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/russie_2020_04_censure_novaia_gazeta_rus_0.pdf, 14/08/20

²² İsmet Çiğit and Güngör Arslan, <https://www.seskocaeli.com>

²³ „Полиција дошла по новинарку портала Nova.rs због текста о Клиничком центру Војводине”, 02.04.2020, <http://www.uns.org.rs/desk/vesti-iz-medija/96280/policija-dosla-po-novinarku-portala-novars-zbog-teksta-o-klinickom-centru-vojvodine.html>, 14/08/20

disease to infect more people in their countries, and, tragically, contributed to more people succumbing to the disease.

Discussion

The current COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel human coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, is an unprecedented event in recent human history in many aspects. By reaching nearly all the countries in the world and causing strong restrictive reactions in many countries, the ongoing pandemic presents perhaps the greatest social challenge for this generation and threatens to permanently change the life as we know it²⁴. This challenge is reflected in all factors of society, some of which have a more important role than others. In short, we must first preserve the health of citizens from infectious diseases, then protect health systems from severe shocks, preserve the economy, society as a whole, and then preserve the mental health and quality of life of each individual, both during a pandemic and after the pandemic ends. This is not an easy task, and one of the foundations of its successful implementation is true and timely information. However, both in regular situations and in pandemics, true and timely information is sometimes contrary to the interests of certain centers of power, for the sake of achieving their goals, which may be in the interest of all citizens, but most often are not. In any case, a citizen who for any reason is not sufficiently and accurately informed about an event of such magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic, is automatically at a disadvantage, and in addition to being denied the right to be informed, they are put in a situation increased security risk in several aspects, from health and socio-economic to those more individual aspects related to psychological, family aspects and others.

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, inconsistencies and controversies began, which led to the creation of confusion among citizens, which in turn could lead to a greater risk for the individual from illness or some other adverse event resulting from incomplete or inaccurate information. For example, if a particular state and health authorities report fewer new infections or deaths from a contagious disease, it can produce a more comfortable approach for citizens in the area of individual disease control. On the one hand, the motive for such manipulation can be to prevent the occurrence and spread of panic, but regardless of the motive, the consequences are the same, and that thin line of doing wrong things for the right reasons often disappears and those real reasons become irrelevant. Of course, if the entire media chain does its job in the right way, the possibility of manipulations characteristic of centralized systems is reduced. If local media inform the public about events in their local area in a timely and accurate manner, then it is significantly more difficult to manipulate information, especially in terms of presenting the situation as more favorable than it is. Simply, it is easier to get information at the local level, because by the nature of smaller local communities it is easier to reach sources and

²⁴ Željko Bjelajac, Aleksandar Filipović (2020): „Lack of Security Culture in Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic“, *The Culture of Polis*, Year XVII (2020), No. 42, 383-399

get the truth, compared to efforts to get the truth from the top, which is, again by its nature, significantly more closed and exclusive. In other words, the good work of local media and journalists relieves investigative journalism, because it reveals, describes and communicates events and the situation at the basic level, and the sum of basic levels gives a clearer picture of the regional and national situation, and investigative journalists can dedicate themselves to more complex hidden issues.

The magnitude of the crisis event, logically, increases the magnitude of the importance not only of information, which by its nature implies new information, but of the overall communication in the crisis. It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, and is a special part of public relations. In a broader sense, crisis communication implies the selection and communication of information in crisis situations, which are very broadly defined. For example, a public figure who finds himself in a compromising situation takes steps characteristic of crisis communication in order to reduce the damage caused by that event. The same applies to organizations and state institutions, which should be prepared in advance for crises that can be predicted, and an epidemic of infectious disease, regardless of all the specifics of COVID-19, is certainly an event for which there had to be a communication plan. It turned out, however, that many states and their institutions were not only not ready for such an event, but did not adhere to the principles of crisis communication in general. This has led to the disruption of relations between institutions and citizens, as well as to the growth of mistrust, which practically means a decrease in unity, in a situation when the unified collective response of the entire society is practically the only thing that can save that society from the consequences of a crisis event that is so great and pervasive, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The current pandemic is an event that completely overwhelmed the world on one hand, while almost completely exposed the shortcomings of the contemporary society on the other. Mass media and information in general are only one segment in that sense, no matter the importance and influence it has on all the other segments. Still, precisely because of that influence and respective expectations, we can conclude that the mass media did not perform its function in the best way possible. There are many reasons for it – starting from the fact that the information at the source and the beginning of the spread of this disease were communicated in a selective way, which reduced the chance of adequately identifying the dangers posed by this disease, through the lack of expertise of journalists for narrow expert topics, to prevalent copy-paste culture and approach in creation of media content. We have already stated that information has failed at all levels - from local and regional, to national and international. And when that happens, the truth, unique and complete, most often suffers and gets lost in the cacophony of various data that is a constant in the digital age. However, although we still cannot identify a certain positive trend that would suggest that things will be significantly better in the future, we can conclude that the level of information about COVID-19 six months after the pandemic

is significantly higher than at the beginning, and that that fact implicitly says that citizens are more prepared for the challenges that this disease brings. On the other hand, the forced detours necessary to obtain information, the vast amount of inaccurate information and the loss of credibility of the people and institutions that represented authority in public discourse are topics that both global and local societies will have to deal with if they want to regain functionality and trust after the pandemic passes.

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УЛОГА МАСОВНИХ МЕДИЈА У ДЕАФИРМАЦИЈИ БЕЗБЕДНОСНЕ КУЛТУРЕ ТОКОМ ПАНДЕМИЈЕ COVID-19

Сажетак: Аутори у раду анализирају конфузију насталу током пандемије и сучељавају основаност права државе да у кризним ситуацијама као што је пандемија COVID-19 чак и делимично суспендује „право јавности да зна“, са обавезом исте државе да увек и безусловно омогући масовним медијима да информишу јавност о свему што је у интересу јавности. Кроз питање ко одређује шта је интерес јавности у информисању о COVID-19, аутори промишљају евентуални сукоб интереса држава и здравствених власти на једној, и грађана на другој страни, и колико тај сукоб интереса резултира незнањем грађана о ономе што треба да ураде да би умањили ризик од болести, па самим тим деафирмише безбедносну културу током пандемије. Аутори разматрају и улогу масовних медија без којих држава не може да комуницира са грађанима, нити без медија може да успостави одрживу безбедносну културу становништва неопходну за излазак из епидемије COVID-19.

Кључне речи: пандемија, држава, медији, новинарство, информисање, безбедносна култура

