

**GUIDELINES FOR SAFE
AND PROFESSIONAL
REPORTING ON
CORONAVIRUS
(COVID-19)**



Association of Journalists of Macedonia

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INTRODUCTION

Reporting about coronavirus, from ethical perspective, is rather complex task as the media face two major responsibilities: telling the truth and not causing unnecessary anxiety and public concern.

Given the abundance of information available, both from traditional sources (media, healthcare institutions) and new sources (blogs, social networks), it becomes increasingly clear how difficult is the task of the media to report on this phenomenon.

The increasing influx of information on COVID-19 (disease caused by coronavirus) is challenge for both journalists and professionals they talk to, in their search for information. They must distinguish between legitimate and reliable sources of information, on the one hand, and speculation, semi-truths and propaganda information, on the other.

At the social networks and the Internet we have come across numerous contents that can provoke strong emotional reactions, such as panic or fear. Some media publish such information without checking whether it is true or thinking about the consequences of their publication.

The spread of COVID - 19 is cause for great public concern, but reporting in some media outlets has increased anxiety in manner that is not ethically justified. Spread of misinformation during epidemic or pandemic of diseases can have serious consequences, while reducing the volume of harmful advice and recommendations can reduce such effect.

The Council for Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM) and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) have urged the media to behave professionally and ethically and avoid spreading lies and creating panic among the public. Guidelines for professional, responsible and ethical reporting on coronavirus are prepared as part of efforts to foster the important role of the media in proper under-

standing of the occurrence of coronavirus, its consequences and manners for effective prevention.

The guidelines are based on the recommendations of international organizations such as Poynter, First Draft, Journalist's Resource, Open Notebook, Re-frame, World Health Organization (WHO), experienced journalists, scientists and experts.

Furthermore, the purpose of these Guidelines is to provide basic information for the protection of journalists and media workers in the performance of their field duties and in newsrooms and studios.

Journalists and media workers are exposed to risks during their field work, in the newsrooms and in their television and radio reporting studios. Such risks are on the rise amid officially declared pandemic by the World Health Organization.

These guidelines should direct journalists and media workers to self-protection, but also to protect others around them, during performance of their duties.

The media, in addition to providing ethical reporting on the situation with the coronavirus pandemic, also educate the public through their self-awareness, which is part of the crisis management solution.

Authors

GOOD CHECK OF INFORMATION

False and inaccurate information is disseminated at high speed and people often spread it without any verification. A group of scientists from the University of Technology in Massachusetts in 2018 found that stories that trigger emotional response are much more shared than other content.¹ And neurologists also confirm that we are more likely to remember stories that make us angry, sad, or ridiculed.² For these reasons, it is especially important to check the source of information before producing journalistic content. “Although other media report on particular story, it does not mean that the source of the information is reliable.”³

Part of the journalists’ responsibility is to discover the origin of the information. It often implies that public figures, officials, ministers and other sources or interlocutors are asked questions about the origin of the information they provide. Amid widespread public concern, government officials, public figures and media outlets are expected to abide by high standards of accountability.

While some content is illustrated with chart or graph, this does not mean that the numbers are correct and the arguments supported. The problem with “fast science”, as Reuters points out, is that people can panic or make the wrong decisions before data is properly explored.

¹ Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., Aral S. „*The spread of true and false news online*“, Science 09 Mar 2018: Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151 DOI: 10.1126/science.aap9559

² Anne Barr, R. (2019) *Galaxy brain: the neuroscience of how fake news grabs our attention, produces false memories, and appeals to our emotions*, Nieman Lab, accessed on: <https://www.niemanlab.org/about/>

³ First Draft (2020) *Tips for reporting on Covid – 19 and slowing the spread of misinformation*, accessed on: <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/tips-for-reporting-on-covid-19-coronavirus-and-slowing-the-spread-of-misinformation/>

It's important:

- Determine the source and where the information comes from.
- Consult official sources of information, such as the WHO website on coronavirus (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>).

DON'T ALLOW TO BE ALLURED BY ONLINE DISINFORMATION

Check out these things when browsing the social networks

Source – Think and consider what is in the background. Check the origin of the website or social network profile, check basic data, names and surnames

History – Does the source has any agenda? Find out what types of topics they report most often and whether they promote only one perspective

Evidence – Study the details of a claim and see if it is backed up by credible evidence

Emotions – does the source rely on any emotions to make a point? Make sure if there is sensationalistic, inflammatory or divisive rhetoric

Pictures – pictures are worth thousand words. Check what message the photo illustrates and whether the source uses images to attract attention

Source: First Draft

CONTINUITY OF INFORMATION

It is important for the media to maintain continuity in reporting on COVID-19 not only to the audiences it follows, but also to the public that has not previously paid much attention to the problem.

This means that there will be need to report in the manner that also informs the under-informed, providing the appropriate context and necessary information, even if the same content is repeated.

CALMING TENSIONS AND OFFERING SOLUTION

Amid widespread concern and anxiety about the spread of the virus and its consequences, the media should help citizens with specific information about the protection and measures to be taken. Recommendations should be based on relevant and official sources, such as the World Health Organization and health institutions and officials with good verification of the reliability of the information they provide.

Recognizing fear and uncertainty can help overcome them. Reporting should reflect public concerns, but should also provide reliable information on how to act. At the same time, the media recognizing the need for answers the questions that citizens have, should point out that some of them still do not have the answer and are working to find solution to the problem, if that is the case.

USE OF APPROPRIATE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The media should base their reporting on information from more than one source. Different experts have different perspectives and information that would be useful to create complete picture of the circumstances and context of the problem.

“Look for infectious disease and public health experts to come up with arguable information and be prepared to come across people who are trying to portray themselves as experts who are not.”⁴ It happens that some politicians or public figures present the harms and dangers as minor, while some unskilled people try to impose inappropriate therapies and modes of protection. In effort to get information as quickly as possible, journalists sometimes ask questions to persons who lack knowledge on the subject in order to provide appropriate explanation and opinion. Bill Hanage Professor of Epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health recommends that journalists find researchers or professionals with knowledge and experience on the subject, and if they find that they lack specific knowledge they should report on. “While reporting on pandemic, it is important for journalists to explain what the experts know and what they think they know, based on their experience and assessment of the evidence”⁵.

The media must also avoid “false balance” in the choice of interlocutors and must not allow the use of statements by interlocutors that are irrelevant and lack information that is important to the public.

⁴ Open Notebook (2020) *Tip sheet: Covering the coronavirus epidemic effectively without spreading misinformation*, accessed on: <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/03/02/tipsheet-covering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-effectively-without-spreading-misinformation/>

⁵ Journalist’s Resource, *Covering COVID-19 and the coronavirus: 5 tips from a Harvard epidemiology professor*, 06.03.2020, accessed on: <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/public-health/covid-19-coronavirus-epidemiology/>

Journalists usually quote doctors, although often non-medical staff, such as nurses, can provide relevant and useful information, drawing on their experience, especially when it comes to controlling infectious diseases.

USE OF APPROPRIATE TITLES

During pandemic, when information is expanding rapidly, it is not enough to create headlines that only focus on the rest of the story. “In such circumstances, it must be borne in mind that the average reader only experiences your reporting through the headline.”⁶

Although the journalistic text may contain careful and precise explanations, it is still very important how the headlines will be set up, as the audience often only goes through them and does not read the rest.

At the same time, it is recommended that newsrooms adapt titles for different platforms, distinguishing between the titles that audiences read on social networks and the titles that appear when citizens will search for information on search engines.

⁶Reframe, *Reframe: Reporting on coronavirus*, accessed on: <https://reframe.resolvephilly.org/covid-19/>

USE OF SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS

The media should convey the information simply and clearly by illustrating the main points. It is recommended that they focus on the facts in simple manner with aim to draw the attention of the audience and propose specific steps and measures.

USE OF RIGHT VOCABULARY, WITHOUT SENSATIONALISM

The vocabulary used in the reporting is very important and it should correspond to the actual events and circumstances.

In the news reporting, words such as “deadly virus”, “killer”, “disaster”, “horror” are often used. Such words attract more clicks, but can also trigger panic, as opposed to what epidemiologists, virologists, health authorities and others recommend.

Therefore, the recommendation is that the worse the situation is, the more journalists limit their subjective adjectives and adhere to solid facts. The public is aware that the situation is serious.

“Journalists must distinguish between the nature of the threat and the responsibility to manage the audience emotions and not to spread excessive fear,” said Professor Karin Val Jorgensen from the University of Cardiff.

Journalists should also avoid using quotes from interlocutors who refer to speculation, sensationalism or rumours.

FRAMING THE STORIES IN THE RIGHT CONTEXT

“Whenever appropriate, the media should help citizens understand how the health system and science work, how the immune system works, and how viruses are transmitted and affected.”⁷ It is important that the media avoid informing only as “service”, without explaining the actual context. “Stories that explain to people how to prevent and transmit the virus are less frightening than those that do not contain such information.”⁸

Journalists should emphasize that coronavirus, for most people, is deadly. According to the WHO, such new virus that no one is immune to, means more people are susceptible to infection, and globally about 3.4% of reported cases died of the disease.⁹ Information of this kind, with appropriate statistical interpretation of the data, should be included in regular media reporting and thus enable the public to obtain accurate picture and to be properly informed.

CAREFUL USE OF VISUALIZATION

One of the most common ways to spread misinformation is through photos and videos that are used in variety of contexts. When using any materials of this type, the audience should be given accurate picture of the situation in which it

⁷ Open Notebook (2020) *Tip sheet: Covering the coronavirus epidemic effectively without spreading misinformation*, accessed on: <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/03/02/tipsheet-covering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-effectively-without-spreading-misinformation/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ World Health Organization, “*WHO Director General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID – 19*”, accessed on: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---3-march-2020>

was made, origin, context, etc. It is especially important to avoid using generic photos / illustrations that incite additional fears and panic.

There are tools online that allow you to check the origin and authenticity of your photos (such as Google image, RevEye's Plugin, TinEye, Bing, etc.) and videos (InVid). Geolocation can also be used to find out where the photo or video was taken.

ACTIVE ROLE IN DETECTING MISINFORMATION

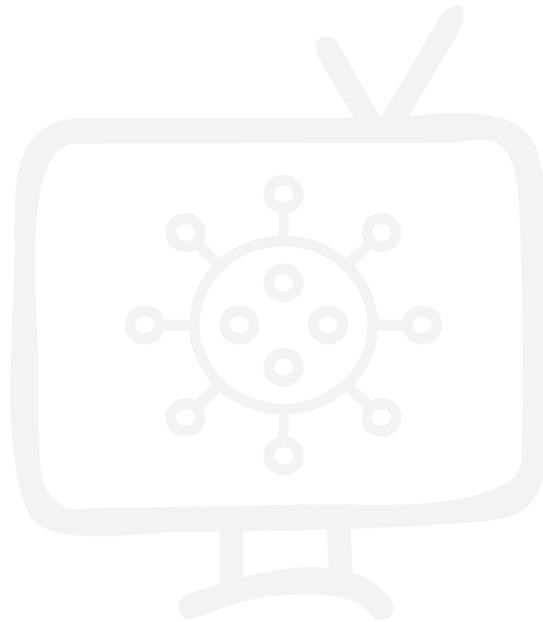
The media are expected to play active role in exposing misinformation and wring information. In that process it is important to replace false information with something that is true. "Immediately inform them that this is false information, especially in the headlines. Explain the reasons why this lie is spreading, why people believe it or why someone is promoting certain things. This will help people understand why they are following this misinformation even though they are wrong. Simple and short explanations are usually the most effective."¹⁰

Contact program and program hosts also play particularly important role, and are expected closely to monitor the statements of those involved in order to avoid misinformation being transmitted in the air. This is especially the case when people involved in the live program share unverified information from social networks, published in other media, etc.

The editorial staff should also check the facts stated in the articles. For example, recent article in the New York Post claims that coronavirus is biologi-

¹⁰ Open Notebook (2020) *Tip sheet: Covering the coronavirus epidemic effectively without spreading misinformation*, accessed on: <https://www.theopennotebook.com/2020/03/02/tipsheet-covering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-effectively-without-spreading-misinformation/>.

cal weapon derived from a Chinese laboratory without any scientific evidence. “The article was opinion packed with the language of science and written by the president of the Population Research Institute, a non-profit organization that opposes population control.”¹¹



¹⁰ Journalist's Resource, *Covering COVID-19 and the coronavirus: 5 tips from a Harvard epidemiology professor*, accessed on: <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/public-health/covid-19-coronavirus-epidemiology/>

Given that it is newly identified virus and the source is unknown, there are still number of limitations to the knowledge of its transmission. Under certain conditions, the airway transmission of some coronaviruses has been observed during unprotected exposure to contaminated aerosols by respiratory secretions or faecal material, which even in the case of this coronavirus has not been excluded at this time. In humans, it is transmitted through the respiratory tract through the respiratory secretions released during coughing and / or sneezing. Coronaviruses usually cause more serious illnesses in adults, people with impaired immune systems and those living with chronic diseases (diabetes, cancer or chronic lung disease).

Journalists, media workers, editors-in-chief, managers and those who organize meetings with journalists or journalists who organize meetings with sources of information both for themselves and for colleagues, and for the general public, are obliged to abide by the recommendations and guidance provided by the relevant state institutions, such as the Ministry of Health (MOH), the Institute of Public Health (IPH), the Regional Centres for Public Health (PHI), the Commission on Infectious Diseases (CPI), the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, the President and other state institutions and organizations and associations of journalists and media workers that transfer their recommendations and information from international organizations, in line with WHO.

STANDARD PRECAUTION MEASURES

1. Hand hygiene (regular and thorough hand washing).
2. Basic principles of good respiratory hygiene:
 - sneezing and coughing in clean handkerchief or paper towel for single use;
 - dispose of the used handkerchief / handkerchief correctly in a sealed waste bin;
 - sneezing and coughing in the sleeve at the height of the upper arm and / or elbow joint (bent elbow on the inside) and not doing so in the palm;
 - Maintain distance of at least one meter between you and other people.
3. Personal protective equipment appropriate with the assessed risk, especially for handling of equipment used by media workers (disinfectants for cameras, microphones, desktops ...), and thus safe handling, cleaning and disinfection of everything that comes in contact with media workers.
4. Cleaning the working environment and the external environment.
5. Proper waste management in and out the premises.
6. Identify one media employee who will be responsible for communicating and informing the situation during the KOVID-19 pandemic.



- Media management is obliged to release from work duties journalists and media workers who have some of the chronic diseases diagnosed published on the list of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Northern Macedonia and send them in isolation or make agreement with them if they want to work from home.
- Elderly journalists and media workers, those with chronic health conditions who are not on the list of MOH in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as pregnant journalists and media workers who actively go to work on their own decision, are still some of the people who have high risk of exposure to the virus and therefore the employer should give them responsibilities that they can handle at home, or exclusively editorial tasks.
- When reporting from places with larger group of people, keep at least three to five meters away from the group, if necessary to approach it for shooting or shooting.
- When reporting on event, ask the event organizer for information on whether the space (if closed) has provided separate section for media and the possibility of at least one meter distance between the news crews of each medium, especially the cameramen, whether it is sedentary or standing meeting.
- Also ask for protection from using the same microphone to ask questions. If these protocols are not complied with the standards, ask the organizers to provide them, or to give you access to the event's online broadcast (if they have one), from where you will provide the statements. Otherwise, if you must report such event, arrange with your colleagues to deploy yourself through the space, thus keeping distance between them.
- You can also ask the event and PR person of the event organizer if you can submit the questions electronically and have them asked exactly as they

are written to the person of interest to the media, and then receive transcript of answer the questions.

- Journalist teams or media managers can also agree among themselves to send only one team to all media outlets when it comes to events of public interest related to the situation, whereby the journalist from that team will ask questions from interest of each medium and with that the team will share the recorded material. Or, the public service broadcaster can provide this on contractual basis.
- If you are sent to travel to countries where there is increased number of registered cases of “coronavirus” strictly observe all recommendations and guidelines for prevention.

FIELD REPORTING RECOMMENDATIONS

- The cameramen should constantly disinfect the equipment for work by means provided by management. The tips of the tripods that come in contact with the ground must not be touched with unprotected hands. In addition, disinfect the parts where the tripods are most commonly grasped with hands, as well as the handles of the carrying case of the equipment, as well as the parts of the camera where it comes into contact with the

hands or face. The same advice applies to any additional equipment needed to carry out the recording, including cables that are most often on the ground or floor.

- Photojournalists should do the same with their work equipment.
- The microphone handle used in the field should be disinfected same any other equipment, but also if the microphone has protective sponge on it, it should either be treated with spray disinfectant separately or not used when not needed. When making statements, keep the microphones at the maximum distance allowed, and if not possible, then place them on different side for each interlocutor as well as for the journalist when using them, so that they should not come in touch at all the hands which would later touch parts of the face, or touch the microphone itself to one's lips.
- Dictaphones and other sound recorders, including cell phones, should be disinfected before and after leaving on surfaces that are public and uncertain whether they are disinfected and by that preventing another person to come in contact with them during recording, as well as later.
- Every journalist should use their own headphones (if not provided) for link inclusions, for whose hygiene and disinfection will be personally responsible.
- In recording and in live coverage, if the journalists have an interlocutor, then the minimum distance between each of the participants (journalist - cameraman - interlocutor) should be one meter.
- Vehicles use for field work should be disinfected before and after use, and in particular door and door handles, steering wheel and gearboxes.

ing at risk for infection, such as hospital or clinic. Additionally, never leave the equipment directly on the floor surface. If possible, place a pad which you will later throw in sealed waste bin and wipe the equipment immediately with wipes, disinfecting it thoroughly. At these locations, if possible, seek protective clothing for disposable footwear, or wear waterproof footwear, the latter have to be washed before leaving the risk site. Follow the authorities' recommendations in such cases.

- Always make sure your hands are thoroughly washed with soap and water or alcohol-based disinfectant before, during and after leaving the risk site.
- The World Health Organization has stated that no protective masks are needed for people who do not have symptoms unless otherwise instructed by the authorities. Especially when shooting in hospital / clinic or affected area. However, if you wear protective mask instead of simple surgical mask, wear a N95 mask or FFP2 / FFP3 respiratory mask. Make sure that the mask covers the part of the face from the nose to the lower part of the chin. In doing so, be careful that no air enters at the ends. If you have a beard or moustache that goes beyond the bounds of the mask, keep in mind that it is useless because it does not close the main entrances to the virus particles. Avoid touching the mask. When you remove it, only grasp it for the elastic parts. Never touch the mask itself, especially not the front part.

EDITORIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- The media to consider the option, if possible based on available human resources, to divide the sectors, newsrooms and technical departments into two teams that will never have physical or private communication with each other during the pandemic. This recommendation is of particular interest to the public service broadcaster, which, in the most conservative scenarios, should have available public reporting teams. With this recommendation it is avoided the possibility of contaminating the collective as whole and maintaining optimal operating conditions.
- One has to worry about communicating with colleagues who are absent due to the measures of the RNM Government, or are in compulsory self-isolation because of travelling to one of the countries at risk. The same person should inform each employee if he or she has been in contact with infected person, or person travelling to one of the countries at risk, to recommend self-isolation to such employee, as recommended by the RNM MoH.
- Any employee who can perform his / her job duties his / her home without blocking should be encouraged by management to do so. No matter if it belongs to any of the groups at risk, or to any of the groups that are part of the recommendations of the Government of RNM. This will reduce the frequency of people indoors and thus the risk of spreading the virus.
- Each media should have disinfectant or alcohol-based gel on the front door where every employee or guest must disinfect their hands thoroughly before leaving and returning.
- Have such means in several places throughout the media facilities for regular use and constant disinfection of the hands at the workplace.

- It is recommended, if not necessary, that meetings and colleges are not held, or held as small as possible, or through alternative modes of communication (video conferencing, telephone or in the open), where there would be one meter between each person present.
- It is recommended to put illustrations on how properly to wash your hands in the hallways, info boards or visible areas, as well as other information that management will find important to highlight.
- Specify a room where people can eat. Food should not be left in the other rooms or in the personal belongings of the employees; much less it should be stored.
- Glasses should be kept in covered place.
- It is recommended that the physical separation between each employee be at least one meter.
- Waste bins in the premises should be closed or covered, or sufficiently distant from all employees. The same is true for external bins with higher waste capacity.
- If any staff member has symptoms of the common cold or the flu, and are diagnosed as not related to “coronavirus” and still coming to work (not recommended), should sit at their workplace with protective “surgical” mask (not respiratory or N95), which would prevent the decline of the collective immunity of all employees.
- If you suspect someone in your staff is showing symptoms of “coronavirus”, without panic point to the person assigned for COVID-19 communication or ask the employee, at least one meter away, to isolate in room, where no one will enter. Contact epidemiologists immediately.

- If COVID-19 is already expanding in the collective, anyone who develops even mild colds or flu symptoms, or has a fever (of 37.3°C) should stay home and work from home. Even those taking paracetamol / acetaminophen, brufen / ibuprofen or aspirin, too, as these medications can mask the symptoms of infection.
 - The common rooms should be ventilated regularly, and in the rooms where they are air-conditions and do not have windows (deaf rooms, studios, master rooms, link rooms, directing ...), air conditioners should be maintained regularly and cleaned. The same is true for air conditioners in rooms with windows.
 - Do not borrow pens, USB stickers, lighters, pencils or other small everyday items that are not known on what surfaces were left.
- In pandemic situation, every employee takes care of the hygiene for common areas:
 - Door handles should be wiped regularly with alcohol disinfectant.
 - Soap, water, toilet paper and hand wipes should be constantly in the toilets.
 - In the kitchen soaps, water and hand wipes, as well as liquid detergents for dishwashers and cups. Keep containers and cups in closed containers.
 - Provide individual sponge for each make-up, and guests should be advised to bring their own make-up and accessories. If possible, allow hot water and soap into makeup room for permanent hygiene, due to the contact with faces.
 - Work surfaces (desks, keyboards, mice, chair handles) should be regularly disinfected with alcohol-based agent.

- Techniques used repeatedly in directing and in other rooms, such as deaf off-ton cabins or common printers should be also disinfected, at least with disinfectant spray system.
- The microphones in the off-cab and in the studio should be more distant than the standards and if possible reporters, hosts and studio guests should not speak directly to them. Disinfect sponges on microphones with minimum of 60 percent alcohol disinfection with a spray system.
- Surfaces of studio counters, tables and other types of furniture should also be constantly disinfected.
- The editors should maintain regular disinfection of desktops, keyboards and mouse for work, and if it is not necessary to use headphones, to use speakers. If headset is used, it should be wipe it with disinfectant. The same applies to all media workers, including sign language interpreters, who are exposed to work on computer and / or with headset or other type of work equipment.
- The cameramen should take care of the hygiene of the recording and transmission equipment and its disinfection.

GUEST APPEARANCES

- Hosts that host guest appearances can organize them as online guest appearances via Skype, Zoom (www.zoom.us) or other similar platforms, so that self-isolated individuals who are of public interest may continue to be part of the debate. This will be especially necessary when the pandemic is at its peak, and the measures will be extremely restrictive for the population, as well as general anxiety about leaving home.

If, however, they have guests, who will be in the studio, ask if they have travelled in one of the countries at risk in the past 14 days, and if not, whether they have had contacts with people who have travelled in the risk country in the past 14 days. This will reduce the possibility of spreading the “coronavirus” in the workplace, thus protecting the entire media from isolation should a registered case occur in the collective.

- Encourage guests to come by their own vehicle or by taxi, as opposed to the media transport provided by official vehicle.

Guests are obliged to disinfect their hands when entering the medium facilities.

- At the hairdressing and make-up services of the guests, before and after them, the used equipment should be disinfected.

ONLINE SECURITY DURING THE CRISIS

- Pay attention to your digital security and safety. Note that based on data from cyber security company Norton, international journalist organizations have reported fraudsters and hackers sending spam emails related to Covid-19 (“coronavirus”) with the possibility of stealing personal data. If this happens to you, please report it to the Department of Cybercrime and Digital Forensics at the RNM MoI.

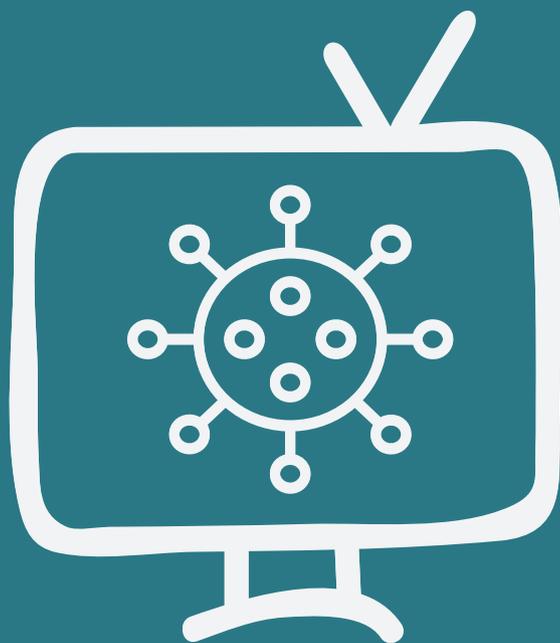
EMPLOYMENT RELATION ADVICES

If you are denied the right, according to the decisions and recommendations made by the Government of RNM regarding your dismissal from work during the COVID-19 pandemic and / or mobbing through other sources of endangering your health and / or the health of your colleagues, contact the State Labour Inspectorate at 151-31 at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), or the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM). This also applies to employees who, according to specific guidelines and recommendations of the Government of the RNM, are exempted from working duties as parents of children up to a certain age.

The Government of RNM also addressed the public and private sector employers in this area, pointing out that the non-compliance will be sanctioned, in accordance with Articles 205 and 206 of the Criminal Code (CC) for the risk of spreading infectious diseases.

USED SOURCES FOR PART B:

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