

# Recommendations towards increased integrity and professional level on online media

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*Macedonian online sphere is flooded with informative websites that represents themselves as media. It is evident that the level of public informing in the online sphere is on warningly low level. How to differentiate the false from important - the solution is through self-regulation not state regulation.*

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Recently, as a consequence of numerous abuses in the online media sphere in Macedonia calls for so called "regulation of portals" became more frequent. The fact that raises more concern is that these calls come even from journalists and editors.

The world standards and practices, ratified international conventions, numerous debates and the several publications on the subject prove the contrary - that regulation of the content of the online media is impossible and unnecessary. There is only need for the existing laws to be applied responsibly.

However, problems are evident and it is noticeable that Macedonian online sphere is flooded with informative webpages which represent themselves as media. The presence of hate speech, discrimination, label, insults, disqualifications, breaking of human rights, authors rights and calls for breaking the constitution are frequent.

The solution is self-regulation not state regulation. Some of the aspects of these are present in the analysis **Recommendation towards responsible online media** which is complementary with the recommendations present here.

The essence of media is not their technical ability to distribute information, but their capacity and the way they do that i.e. how they objectively follow happenings and in respect of public interest to distribute quality, fact checked and objective media products with high professional and ethical standards.

An individual or any other entity that has an intention to inform the public on internet does not necessary have to have such standards. Here a line should be drawn between media content and citizen informing, especially present on social networks and blogs but for Macedonia characteristic also for websites that represent themselves as media besides not fulfilling even minimum standards.

Digitalization not only changed the way people communicate, but significantly and irreversibly transformed the nature of journalism and ethics. While new media encourage people to publish what they have on their mind, in democratic societies there is a need for independent journalists

who works towards providing trustworthy and unbiased news and analysts, says Dunja Mijatovic, the exrepresentative of OSCE for freedom of media in the Guide for media self-regulation.

It appears that journalists and media did not cope well with this new public sphere, where all can communicate to all. Seems that in Macedonia they cope with the situation even less than in more developed countries, which resulted with evident degradation of online informative sphere. As a consequence, there are calls for state regulation even from journalists and editors.

The global phenomenon of fake news and Veles teenagers made Macedonia famous as a specific El Dorado for successful creating and mass distribution of fake and twisted content on internet.

However, it must not be forgotten that this “freedom” of speech is crucial against undemocratic societies. As analyses say: The internet space and internet media in Macedonia in the period from 2008 to 2017 grew into an alternative public sphere which represented one of the rear “cracks” in which many pressured, marginalized, neutral and critical voices succeeded to emerge and gain visibility.

Nevertheless, this explosion of information and media also brought many challenges for the professional journalism from concerning degradation of ethical standards to numerous legislation dilemmas.

The other crucial problem with so-called portals (the term besides being common and frequently used is wrong because internet portal is website where content from other online media is aggregated) is anonymity, i.e. the lack of identity followed by lack of integrity. Very few of online media have impressum, they do not have signed authors and their ownership in vast portion is a mystery.

Anonymity which is characteristic for all web entities and the ease to start new websites resulted with formation of **paramedia** - entities which act as media and in its essence are not: they do not have journalists, do not create original content, do not have editorial structure and they aim is not protecting the public interest. Another phenomenon which leads in same direction is colonization of existing informative web pages with weak integrity into clusters lead by one center with increased one-sided political agenda.

Political and economic centers took over or created numerous web pages whose only aim is not to inform but to distort the public opinion with fake news, propaganda and half-truth.

Disrespect towards journalism standards and the ethical code of journalists is common. The most warring is the widespread hate speech and failure for the Public prosecutor office to act in such cases. Failure to act on numerous cases of discrimination, for which special agency exists, also should be subject of observation.

The virtual legislation vacuum with omitting the online media in media laws must be cleared with intensive informing of all actors in the public communication for the role of online media, their rights and responsibilities, as well as on the existing legislation.

## **Stimulating transparency, identity and integrity of online media**

As a main cure of fake news and paramedia which abuse the public space, a distinction for media have identity and integrity should be used. This can be also gained by stimulating the transparency of online media as well as they are public consent that they will respect the ethical and professional standards.

Online media that respect their legal obligations, ethical norms and professional journalism standards should be affirmed as positive example and by that they can enjoy additional privileges. Professional online media should have transparently published ownership, editorial structure, ethical code, privacy policy and signed authors. One of the steps towards this is these criteria to be necessary to fulfill for membership into Council of media ethics and some of them already are.

Towards this, the Council has initiative of creating voluntary registry of web portals of its members. According to the conditions for membership in the Council internet portals that want to gain membership is necessary to fulfill conditions as to have impressum, founder and contact data, to have consent for respecting the ethical code, published articles to have authors signed and other criteria.

Voluntary registry must be a tool for affirmation of media which do work professionally and ethically and in any case they must not be criteria which will be discriminated.

## **Active self-regulation and public moral sanctions**

With reason that state regulation of the content of online media is neither needed nor possible, (guaranteed human rights, international law, signed conventions, technical impossibility, attempts to regulate outside the state borders...) and in state of numerous abuses it is necessary to increase the efforts towards the self-regulation.

The self-regulatory bodies draw the borders between legitimate rights of free media and the legitimate rights of the people that attract media attention quotes the OSCE **Guide on self-regulation of the media** from 2016.

In the same Guide Haraszti, the new representative of OSCE on freedom of media says: "Media selfregulation is joint effort of media professionals to establish voluntary editorial directions and to respect them in the process of learning opened to the public. With that, the independent media accepts their part of the responsibility for the quality of public discourse in the country, in the same time completely following their own editorial independence in shaping the discourse".

Self-regulation bodies in Macedonia are Council of media ethics and Council of honor and AJM.

It is necessary for them to grow into true defenders of the rights of the audience and the media i.e. into media ombudsman, especially in the case of online media which are not regulated with the media laws.

Maybe, facing the challenge, it will be necessary to increase the capacities of these bodies regarding digital media.

The positive aspects of self-regulation are flexibility and the role of protection mechanism from potential interference of power centers into media content, and weakness is that they apply only moral sanctions and they cannot force to action without willing consent of the media outlet that broke the code.

### **Digital media literacy**

The key actors in solving the problems that appeared with the (too) fast development digital communications are:

- Media
- Audience
- Judiciary

The change in the media sphere from the smaller number of huge actors toward great number of small actors, which have active part in the public informing, influenced the professionalism and the understanding of the digital communications by the journalists. The media outlets got smaller, lack clear hierarchy and according to this their capacity to pass the knowledge to other team members has decreased.

There is huge number of online media with no professional journalists, i.e. employee which would theoretically and practically understand the role of media in the democratic society. The cult of the amateur as more acceptable and more adoptable towards unethical orders and PR techniques opposed to stubbornness and the strong urge for objectivity of professional journalists seriously influenced the HR decisions in media outlets.

One of the three universal roles of the media (to inform, entertain and educate) is dangerously low, and that is the educational.

The capacities of media towards the internal media literacy are decreased, followed by decreased role in educating the audience.

A new ad-hoc process of education of journalist and media workers towards digital communications is needed, from technical, communicational and even legal context is necessary.

The role and the activity of the media is public and by degradation of the quality of the media content there is inactive harmful influence towards education of the audience which itself does not have to be media literate and to differentiate between the ethical and unethical content, between truth and a lie, between informing and propaganda.

The final result is emerging of completely fake news and their significant influence on the public and distortion of the public discourse.

However, there is one positive aspect of this process. The maximum views finally faced the audience with the need to check the truthfulness of the information being served to them. The easiest way to do this is to consult media that enjoy credibility. The wheel is turning in positive direction.

In the same time there is clear need of implementing media literacy, especially digital into the educational curriculum. It is a fact that students are more advanced in use of the digital communications than their professors but not in understanding the ethics of it. It is necessary the abilities of the students to be backed up with appropriate ethical directions, which in their essence are the same offline and online.

Other way of educating the public especially those who finished their education, besides media content, are public campaigns, presentations and workshops.

The practice of impunity towards digital platforms from the judicial system is also view partial lack of media literacy. In this case workshops, seminars and creating of specialized services are recommended.

For normal market based and independent functioning of the media a fair advertising market is necessary. The knowledge is on the side of marketing agencies and the Association IAB Macedonia and it is necessary for them to get involved in the process of media literacy, as well as in debates and creating solutions for development for online advertising.

Within the frame of media literacy there is the recommendation for dialog between lawmakers, judges and journalists, and of course with experts on digital communications and digital advertising.

## **Conclusion**

A practice in which media will guarantee their integrity with transparent identity (ownership, editorial structure, authors, privacy policy) as well as its public consent and guarantee that they will respect the ethical and professional standards.

The positive list in the voluntary registry of the Council of ethics is one of the ways of emphasizing the professional and ethically motivated media.

Through intensive media literacy the main actors in the public online communication must be faced with their rights and obligations, advantages and challenges.

The calls for additional state regulation of the online sphere will bring over the regulation.

Media is best understood by the media and journalists. Self-regulation is faster and more efficient way of dealing with the problems than the state regulation.

An enforcement of the capacities and the role Council of media ethics and the AJM`s Council of honor towards becoming true ombudsman of the audience especially in online sphere.

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