



JOURNALISM, SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-REGULATION:

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



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Author: Marija Dimitrovska, PhD

Editor: Marina Tuneva, PhD

Translation: Maja Hristovska

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INTRODUCTION

The increase in Internet use has significantly altered the manner of accessing information by the public. Internet users have access to a vast pool of data deriving from various sources. Social media have gained relevance as regards the provision of information to citizens.

The number of social media users, primarily among the younger population, marks a steady growth. The statistical data indicate that 1.652.056 people in North Macedonia use the Internet, of which 1.206.000 are users of Facebook¹. According to the State Statistical Office data concerning the first quarter of 2021, out of the total population aged 15 to 74, 86.4% used the Internet, and 80.5% used it every day or every other day².

Social media are considered the primary source of news in countries with weaker media landscapes or in which media have been affected more harshly by the issues occurring in the digital world.³ Even the media themselves recognize social media as an important platform connecting them with their audiences/viewers to promote their work and acquire varied information. Hence, media act not only as news creators but also as active stakeholders in its distribution and dissemination via social media. Additionally, social media have positioned themselves as venues where citizens may access media content (news inclusive)⁴.

However, although social media have significantly facilitated certain journalistic functions and tasks, they have also brought numerous issues, challenges, and problems for newsrooms' day-to-day work-related routines and practices.

1 The data cover the period by December 2020 and are available at the specialized statistical website: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#mk>, accessed on 20.10.2021

2 State Statistical Office, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstenie.aspx?rbtxt=77>, accessed on 10.10.2021

3 Council of Europe Report DGI (2016)18, Challenges and Opportunities for News Media and Journalism in an increasingly digital, mobile and social media environment, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16806c0385>, accessed on 11.10.2021

4 Napoli, P., & Caplan, R. (2017). Why media companies insist they're not media companies, why they're wrong, and why it matters. *First Monday*, 22(5). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i5.7051>

This analysis aims to identify the ways media outlets use and impact the distribution of journalistic content on social media, the practical benefits and shortcomings of their use of social media, and the threats encountered by the journalists and editors. To enable a more realistic overview of these questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 20 media professionals (journalists, editors, and owners of online media outlets). The media were selected for interviews based on different criteria, namely geographical representation, size of the newsroom, the language they use, and the length of their journalistic experience. These interviews have been conducted with representatives of online media that are members of the Register of Professional Online Media within the CMEM (www.promedia.mk).

The Register has been created by the Council of Media Ethics and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia as an outcome of a comprehensive debate on the regulation of issues related to the work of online media, as well as in line with the viewpoint that self-regulation is the most powerful and efficient solution to support media professionalism.

Some of the key criteria media have to fulfill to be eligible to become members of the Register are as follows: transparent ownership, published impressum, adherence to the standards stipulated in the Code of Journalists⁵, the Charter of Ethical Reporting on Elections⁶ and the Statute of CMEM, having published texts signed by the very authors, and citing the source in case of being shared from other media in line with the provisions from the Law on Copyright Protection.

This analysis has been produced within the UNESCO project financed by the European Union, “[*Building Trust in the Media in South East Europe and Turkey – Phase 2.*](#)”

5 The Code is available at: <https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/>

6 The Charter is available at: <https://semm.mk/dokumenti/korisni-resursi/kodeks/950-povelba-za-etichko-izvestuvanje-za-izborite-2021>

1.

SOCIAL MEDIA ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE SCOPE OF WORK OF MEDIA

All the respondents from the media community in North Macedonia confirmed that they actively use social media for posting their journalistic content. They mainly use Facebook due to the common belief that most people have Facebook accounts, followed by Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Viber. These platforms represent the main channel for news distribution, in addition to the use of websites.

“On Facebook, we try to post 12 to 15 news items daily. It is predominantly the author’s content, such as columns, analyses, reports, etc. Occasionally, either once or twice a day, we publish public agencies’ news about current affairs if it is relevant to us, and we don’t manage to have insights of our own author.”⁷ It is believed that publishing the news, lengthier texts, and analytical content on social media such as Facebook contributes to greater readership and coverage. “As a matter of fact, we are most read on Facebook because only on seldom occasions do the readers access the portal for the sake of reading content”⁸.

Media assesses which social media to use to promote content depending on the target population. Instagram is predominantly used by the younger population, so on this platform, media outlets post content considered appealing and able to catch the eye of this specific population. The viewpoint that prevailed in the interviews with media is that social media are crucial for accessing content and that their audiences are more significant on so-

7 Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derali, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

8 Interview with Mr. Igor Petrovski, Editor-in-Chief of Kapital.mk, held on 03.11.2021

cial media than on media websites. “Statistics indicate that social media generate 40% of the visits to our portals. Readability depends on the algorithm, generally on Facebook, regarding how much reach each news item will receive.”⁹

It is a common belief that social media have established a model of facilitated operation, information, and communication among people.

Under certain conditions, media outlets engage in more frequent social media posting, particularly when they are engaged in implementing campaigns and project activities of the civil sector.

Media make assessments regarding the type of news and dynamics of posting on social media to secure broader readability. “We don’t share all news on social media, only the one that is the most crucial and that can have wider readability. If there is overlapping of information, the popularity of the other piece of news declines. Currently, we post different items of news on an hourly basis. Our experience with Facebook has indicated that this is the best frequency.”¹⁰

Similarly, the informative portal Truthmeter (www.vistinomer.mk) regularly publishes its media products of different genres and types on social media. It is a portal that conducts fact and assumption verification - the verification of declared policies and their feasibility, the fact-checking of information about the Covid-19 pandemic and the vaccination process, and the fact-checking of the implementation of specific segments in the Euro-integration processes of the Republic of North Macedonia.

9 Interview with Mr. Gjorgji Selkov, Editor-in-Chief of Popularno.mk., held on 08.11.2021

10 Interview with Ms. Meri Jordanovska, journalist in Alon.mk, held on 05.11.2021

2.

WIDE PUBLIC AND SKEPTICISM ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Media are generally satisfied with posting content on social media, particularly Facebook. “What counts the most is the possibility of reaching wider audiences, posting the content, and receiving some form of news-related feedback”¹¹.

The news that most directly appeals to the average readers, for instance, news concerning salaries or the consumer’s basket, has the broadest reach and engagement. The same popularity refers to crime news and coverage. “However, there are situations when a trivial news item gets high levels of reads, and the

Illustration: freepik.com



¹¹ Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derala, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

other way round, when a news item is expected to be breaking news and yet remains relatively unnoticed¹².

The media believe that their use of social media facilitates the citizens' access to information. "Our portal mainly targets the Roma readers with a lower degree of education. Therefore, using the Internet and searching for our or similar websites through search engines would be a difficult task for them. They find it easier to access news via social media"¹³.

Another added value of social media use for media is that they generate new themes and ideas based on users' comments. "People affected by a topic that is discussed in an article post suggestions and critical observations that serve as an inspiration for us to further elaborate on them"¹⁴. The



12 Interview with Mr. Igor Petrovski, Editor-in-Chief of Kapital.mk, held on 03.11.2021

13 Interview with Mr. Sali Memed, Editor of 24vakti.mk, held on 04.11.2021

14 Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derala, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

media receive a vast amount of information on social media. Frequently, the citizens send photographs and videos of events occurring in their surroundings that they believe can interest the public.

Another noticeable advantage is that, unlike other media, social media allow for media outlets to check the number of people who have seen or clicked on the news item. “In the case of television, even when we have certain data, they are not genuinely realistic. The situation is entirely different here. We have information about the time readers spend on specific posts of news items, whether they watched the video until the very end or watched it only for a few seconds, and so on”¹⁵.

The use of media is also positive marketing-wise. “What counts the most is that social media are accessible to millions of users worldwide. This is, in fact, a matter of global marketing with great potential, which is of tremendous importance for the development and prosperity of any informative portal. The focus of the informative portal is to be on investing in such type of marketing”¹⁶.

The advantage of social media use is that “the content can be shared, recommended, forwarded, commented on, liked, and so on”¹⁷. Media can easily keep track of the reactions on social media to a given post, and such reactions are almost in real-time. “Very often, around half an hour after posting something, we have an insight into the reactions and how this news item of news is perceived by the public”¹⁸.

Nevertheless, some media remain skeptical about the journalistic use of social media and the effects this can cause, although they use social media and are aware of the benefits of this. They think that this makes the audience lazy and it is exposed only to what is shared and not necessarily what people are really interested in.

15 Interview with Mr. Goran Lefkov, Project Manager in inbox7.mk, held on 05.11.2021

16 Interview with Ms. Sonja Milovanovic, Acting Editor of Web in Večer Press, held on 04.11.2021

17 Ibid.

18 Interview with Mr. Darjan Radenkovic, Business Development Director in Vidivaka.mk, held on 02.11.2021

It can also be noted that the shared news items are taken in without proper attention. What is mainly read are the headlines of an article and to a much lesser extent the content that is directly linked in the posts on social networks.

Occasionally media experience technical issues in posting content on social media. They come across some bugs or have some content deemed inappropriate according to certain insufficiently clear and rather vague rules, even though the content is not considered inappropriate otherwise. “Additionally, there are problems when we wish to boost certain content on Facebook, for instance, an interview with a politician. Facebook’s algorithm recognizes this as a political campaign and doesn’t approve the sponsoring with the explanation that such campaigns are subject to special rules and policies. It is a hassle for all to fill in all the required forms”¹⁹.

Certain media state that their content is unrightfully removed from Facebook. “We had an interview accompanied with a photograph of a girl with high academic performance in Germany. We shared the content on Facebook, and the social media reacted to the picture and asked to remove it. We tried explaining that the photograph was related to the interview held



¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Igor Petrovski, Editor-in-Chief of Kapital.mk, held on 03.11.2021

and that the girl gave her consent to posting the picture, but again their viewpoint remained unaltered, and we simply had to remove it”²⁰.

There have even been cases when media professionals had their accounts deleted from social media. “I was working on a story concerning the affair ‘Public Room.’ I joined the Telegram group to make print screens of the chats and the photos shared. Then I used Facebook to send them to the person in charge of editing and design to edit them and blur any faces, names, etc., before we publish them. Immediately after that, Facebook deleted my account because I used the messaging option to share such content. The account had already been deleted, and I had no option of justifying my intent with the content. I never managed to recover my account”²¹.

Illustration: freepik.com



20 Interview with Mr. Dimitar Micev, Owner of TV Vis, held on 29.10.2021

21 Interview with Ms. Meri Jordanovska, Journalist in A1on.mk, held on 05.11.2021

3.

HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA – THERE SEEMS TO BE NO EFFICIENT SOLUTION

When media post about news items that provoke opposing opinions, their social media are flooded by a surge of negative reactions. Such news includes topics concerning the LGBT community, the country's name (North Macedonia), and similar. According to the respondents, the spread of obscenities and disrespectful language, hate speech, and disinformation is the most harmful aspect of their use of social media.

“Therefore, whenever we have topics tackling the LGBT community, we disable the comments option on Instagram. Even though there may be a ban on words to be used in the comments, the audience would still find a way to post them somehow and bypass such algorithms.”²² Some media even turn off the chat option on social media due to the large number of messages they receive, so the users receive a message to contact the newsroom by email.

Hate speech prevails on social media when news items are related to crime, corruption, and politics and political affairs, particularly in periods of elections. As aforementioned, it may be the case with news and content tackling the LGBT population, gender identity, or regarding somebody's ethnicity. “Recently, we had a video about a female same-sex couple. The video focused on different pressures that same-sex couples are exposed to. The comments to the video were full of insults targeted at the girls and us for posting it”²³.

22 Interview with Ms. Emilija Petreska, Journalist in Radio MOF, held on 05.11.2021

23 Interview with Mr. Darjan Radenkovic, Business Development Director in Vidivaka.mk, held on 02.11.2021

Most of the interviewed respondents underlined the frequency of such occurrences citing the habit of skimming through the headlines or not understanding or reading the news entirely as a reason for such reactions.

The fact-checker Truthmeter reports cases of hate speech, and in particular, once they started working with Facebook in a contract for fact-checking in August 2020. From November 2020 until the spring of 2021, a photograph displaying the Metamorphosis employees appeared, labeling them as ‘the Facebook censors.’



Other portals working on fact-checking also reacted to hate speech, disparagement, and discrediting. “We are engaged in the project with Truthmeter. We have been labeled as ‘fascists’ and ‘Nazis.’ The topics that spur most insults are news and Covid-19-related topics”²⁴.

Hate speech occurs in other circumstances as well. The topic is irrelevant. When the intent is to insult, users will do it on any post. They even post comments which are completely unrelated to the topic.

24 Interview with Ms. Ubavka Janevska, Editor-in-Charge of Duma.mk, held on 10.11.2021

The media make efforts to remove any inappropriate and harmful content, but this is not always so simple. “We have set an algorithm that automatically deletes any disrespectful words, but even when an algorithm is in place, it may not always predict all the words and combinations to block automatically”²⁵. “We have a colleague in charge of removing any disrespectful comments, while criticism remains”²⁶.

Often, there are evident ‘surges’ of comments and polarizing views on given topics. “On Twitter, either there are comments with hate speech or likes and re-tweets that indicate approval and support”²⁷. Such reactions have also been noticed by the fact-checker Truthmeter.

Another problematic phenomenon is the use of fake profiles, which, among others, serve to spread disinformation and hate speech, which can’t be con-



Illustration: freepik.com

25 Interview with Mr. Ljupcho Tanevski, Director and Owner of the portals of www.onemedia.mk (Ohrid1.com, www.News1.mk, www.News1.al, www.Lifestyle.mk) held on 29.10.2021

26 Interview with Ms. Vesna Krsteva, Editor-in-Chief of Kanal 77, held on 02.11.2021

27 Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derala, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

trolled. “It is obvious that they attempt to use these fake profiles to give positive comments about a specific political party and negative about another”²⁸.

Some of the media noted that despite their attempts to remove comments containing hate speech, it seemed that Facebook allowed a substantial portion of them to remain on the platform. At the same time, the media are frequently understaffed and cannot follow all the comments.

The interviewed respondents believe that either information is missing regarding the measures or insufficient steps are undertaken to protect against hate speech and its detrimental consequences. The respondents believe that there are no essential and comprehensive measures on social media as regards handling hate speech and its detrimental consequences and that specific steps are undertaken only upon numerous reports on a given case. There is an option to report a given profile, comment, or post, but the practice is that social media seem to focus on mass occurrences. There can be a rather offensive post that violates all rules and regulations, but it will not be deleted if it is reported by only one person. Conversely, if it is far milder but still offensive to a given extent and reported by more people, the social media platform will delete either the post or the profile²⁹.

Otherwise, social media platforms have established mechanisms for reporting hate speech. Despite the multiple reports, the company has not identified a ground to react to the reports. “I believe that a new application should be created that would immediately detect any such situation. The current manner of functioning is inappropriate; the procedures are slow and take a lot of time to verify the information. A swifter response is a must”³⁰.

The spread of disinformation on social media is commonplace, and it is linked to the consequences of hate speech and social polarization. “Facebook or Twit-

28 Interview with Mr. Ljupcho Tanevski, Director and Owner of the portals of www.onemedia.mk (Ohrid1.com, www.News1.mk, www.News1.al, www.Lifestyle.mk), held on 29.10.2021

29 Interview with Mr. Darjan Radenkovic, Business Development Director in Vidivaka.mk, held on 02.11.2021

30 Interview with Mr. Sali Memed, Editor of 24vakti.mk, held on 04.11.2021

ter posts should not be just copied and posted. On the contrary, the people should be contacted, additional explanation should be sought and only accurate information should be published³¹.

The creation of disinformation is increased in times of elections, and this is considered difficult to put under control. Disinformation also prevails in the context of the pandemic, inflicting harm on the public regardless of whether it has been published solely on the portal websites or social media as well. “Regarding disinformation, there are certain portals that create it, but I am convinced that most people, if not all, can already recognize such attempts. The main goal of such portals is to amass clicks and visits to their portals by crafting bombastic headlines”³².

The presence of disinformation on Facebook may at times be recognized, normally by detecting FB groups that are not linked to any websites. “Due to the fact that they are not news media, but social media, it is not easy to recognize disinformation”³³.

However, in the case of online media that have impressum and abide by journalistic standards, disinformation is rare both in the content on their websites and social media. “If an unverified piece of information is shared, this is due to the pace of journalistic work or so-called ‘copy-paste’ journalism. Disinformation appears on some portals or those operating as blogs, which do not belong to the serious, informative outlets and are not members of the Register of Professional Online Media. There is plenty of disinformation on such portals or blogs”³⁴.

The interviewed respondents believe that more stringent measures should be introduced when it comes to tackling disinformation on social media. “We have insights of rare instances when disinformation has been removed from social media by the Facebook administration. In recent times, Face-

31 Interview with Ms. Ubavka Janevska, Editor-in-Charge of Duma.mk, held on 10.11.2021

32 Interview with Mr. Darjan Radenkovic, Business Development Director in Vidivaka.mk, held on 02.11.2021

33 Interview with Mr. Ljupcho Tanevski, Director and Owner of the portals of www.onemedia.mk (Ohrid1.com, www.News1.mk, www.News1.al, www.Lifestyle.mk), held on 29.10.2021

34 Interview with Mr. Teofil Blazhevski, Editor-Journalist in Vistinomer, held on 09.11.

book has been cooperating with local fact-checkers (such as the one established by Metamorphosis) hence attempting to comprehend the local context. Nevertheless, the performance in this direction is minor³⁵.

Others, however, think that more reports of the same post are required so that Facebook may react, and the longer a given piece of information is online, the more harmful its consequences are. “Once the disinformation has spread, it is already too late since the news has reached the audience”³⁶.

Illustration: freepik.com



35 Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derala, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

36 Interview with Ms. Vesna Krsteva, Editor-in-Chief of Kanal 77, held on 02.11.2021

4. THREATS TO JOURNALISTS, APPEAL TO THE INSTITUTIONS TO REACT

Most of the interviewed journalists have not encountered any direct threats targeting their portals, or, in case they have, the threats took place several years ago. These cases were normally reported to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents reported some recent direct threats. “These threats are rather frequent, at least three times per week, and some of them may even be treated as serious. We have reported more than 30 cases to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the past two years. The latest case was on 1 November 2021, and we pursued criminal charges to the Public Prosecutor’s Office. We have not received any response yet”³⁷.

There have even been cases of sexist attacks and insults at female journalists. “The institutions have started to react and respond more, but unless it is a life-threatening case, no criminal charges are pressed, and consequently, the Prosecutor’s Office does not act upon it. Hence, it has to be an ultimate type of threat, so that something is done”³⁸.

Parallel to hate speech on social media, Metamorphosis Foundation (the publisher of “Vistinomer”) has experienced calls for lynching, murder, physical attacks, and so on. “Most of the cases have been documented and reported to the competent service within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, they have just informed us that the cases have been forwarded to the Public Prosecutor’s Office. It has come to a halt, and there have been no subsequent reactions by the competent institutions”³⁹.

37 Interview with Mr. Xhabir Derala, Editor-in-Chief of the Media Platform of CIVIL (civilmedia.mk, drejt.mk, civil.today), held on 17.11.2021

38 Interview with Ms. Meri Jordanovska, Journalist in Alon.mk, held on 05.11.2021

39 Interview with Mr. Teofil Blazhevski, Editor-Journalist in Vistinomer, held on 09.11.2021

5.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has indicated that online media rely on social media to distribute and disseminate their news and enhance their visibility and transparency. They recognize the value of social media primarily due to the following two crucial aspects: access to broader audiences and the possibility of acquiring information and ideas of public interest and worth presenting.

The use of social media presupposes proper tailoring of contents in terms of the specifics and needs of the audiences and more staffed newsrooms concerning risk management.

Moreover, it has been proven that social media present a complex management area for the media because they encounter numerous challenges. Their information is posted on social media platforms where other news creators operate, and these platforms seldom serve as venues for spreading false narratives, disinformation, hate speech, etc. The interviewed respondents are insufficiently familiarized with the criteria and means of addressing such issues by social media. They believe that timely reaction by the platforms is missing, particularly in the case of problematic occurrences, such as hate speech and disinformation. Such phenomena may result in devastating consequences.

The journalists and editors have encountered situations in which their content was unrightfully removed, and in some cases, their personal profiles have been blocked. Some have even been subject to threats, and the competent national institutions have failed to act effectively and efficiently.

It is a common belief that if media adhered to the professional reporting standards, they should be protected once they publish their news/contents on social media. In this context, the recommendation is that differentiation should be made between the content posted by professional media and those posted by media infringing the stipulated ethical and professional standards. In practical terms, this would prevent any attempts of inflicting

damage onto professional content, particularly in cases of orchestrated attempts and coordination in reporting journalistic content that is generally critical (for example, politically, economically, etc.). In line with the afore-stated, the initiative instigated by CMEM regarding the establishment of the Register of Professional Online Media is welcomed since it contributes to abiding by specific criteria and regulations. The recommendation for social media, notably Facebook, is to affirm this initiative. Additionally, social media are encouraged to cooperate with the media self-regulatory bodies, serving as a mediator between the public and media for the purpose of safeguarding the freedom of expression and professional reporting on topics of public interest.

The professional media can assist in combatting disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech on social media. Additionally, the media and journalistic associations play a prominent role. They are expected to react quickly and expand their membership with professional media and journalists, thus combating any adverse phenomena on social media.

Moreover, the media believe that more stringent measures are required on Facebook and other social media to address hate speech and disinformation, as well as 'eliminate bots and fake profiles.' In the context of the afore-stated, the measures undertaken by Facebook aimed at deleting fake profiles are highly appreciated.

Media literacy can be another solution to this. To this end, critical skills should be developed, enabling citizens to assess content appearing on online media and social media. Eventually, the media should make responsible and reasonable use of social media, thus impacting the public differently.



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Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM)
Bul. „Mitropolit Teodosij Gologanov“ 54/2, North
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