

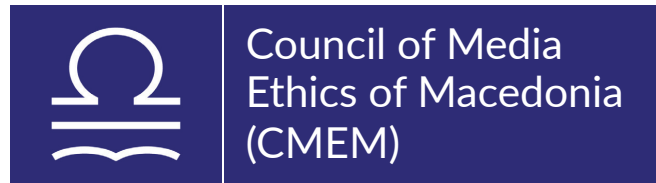


THE CRITICAL ROLE OF MEDIA AND PRESS COUNCILS DURING COVID-19

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The critical role of media and press councils during covid-19

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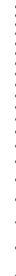
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CONTENT

1.	Introduction: Freedom of expression and journalism in time of crisis	4
2.	International framework for freedom of expression and freedom of information during crisis.....	7
2.1	Overview of recommendations and guidelines for protection of freedom of expression and information in times of crisis	7
2.2	Initiatives of international organizations for protection of freedom of expression and freedom of information during crisis.....	11
2.3	Practical tips and tools for media professionals in times of crisis	12
2.4	North Macedonia: transparency of institutions and support for media self-regulation is necessary	13
3.	The most common breaches of professional media reporting – experiences from several press councils	15
3.1	Reactions to general media reporting and to unverified information	15
3.2	Sensational reporting and hidden advertising	16
3.3	Insufficient protection of privacy and personal data.....	17
3.4	Difficult access to information	19
4.	Other activities by the press councils: awareness raising is of key importance	22
4.1	Press releases and public reactions	22
4.2	Preparation of ethical guidelines for the media.....	23
4.3	Building partnerships and networks of cooperation.....	24
5.	Self-sustainability is among the strongest challenges of the press councils during the pandemic	26
6.	Lessons learned – what can press councils initiate in the future?	27
7.	Conclusions and recommendations	29

1

Introduction: Freedom of expression and journalism in time of crisis

The coronavirus crisis, which has plagued the world since the beginning of 2020, has transformed the way journalists and media work, affected access to information and the way it is presented, influenced conditions for work and safety of journalists and changed the economic status of media professionals and organizations. States and governments, justifiably and necessarily, take various restrictive measures to protect public health in times of crisis. A key question that arises when talking about freedom of information and expression in times of crisis is to what degree measures taken by the authorities should be and how long they should last. Yet, their response must be proportionate to the demands of the situation in respect of human rights and the rule of law, this being the very mark of democratic governance.¹

In relation to the pandemic, advocates for media freedom, past few months have often expressed concern that some governments are using the crisis as a pretext to introduce disproportionate restrictions on press freedom.² In the eight-month period from the start of the pandemic to September 2020, some countries have used

the coronavirus outbreak as an opportunity to further entrench repressive measures on freedom of expression and information, limits on public participation or increased surveillance.³ In such a confusing and tense atmosphere, journalists across the world face verbal and physical attacks, censorship, difficult access to information and locations. For example, in Russia, the Law against Fake News, which was passed in 2019, is used against media that report critically, such as for the lack of personal safety measures for doctors. Those who talk about these problems are being punished. Authorities cut subsidies for an independent television station because it reports critically. The state media continue to receive support, as has been the case before.⁴ On the other hand, at the beginning of the crisis, the Albanian Prime Minister, through a video statement, stated: “Wash your hands and beware of the media”, which does not help the media in their professional work, nor of the self-regulatory bodies, which appeal for observance of ethical and professional standards in reporting.

The International Press Institute (IPI) registered 426 violations of media freedoms during the

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- 1 Council of Europe (2020) *Mitigating a Global Health Crisis While Maintaining Freedom of Expression and Information*, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/en-mitigating-a-global-health-crisis-while-maintaining-freedom-of-expr/16809e2d1e>, пристапено на 29.08.2020
 - 2 European Parliament (2020) *Briefing: The impact of coronavirus on media freedom*, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651905/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)651905_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651905/EPRS_BRI(2020)651905_EN.pdf), accessed on: 27.08.2020.
 - 3 Article 19, *Coronavirus: Impacts on Freedom of Expression*, available at: <https://www.article19.org/coronavirus-impacts-on-freedom-of-expression/>, accessed on: 03.09.2020
 - 4 Kravtsova, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

pandemic, with the largest number in Asia and the Pacific, while Europe recorded the highest number of censorship cases.⁵ Violations include arrests, limited access to information, censorship, restrictive regulations related to misinformation, verbal or physical attacks. Reporters Without Borders reported attacks on at least 125 journalists in 29 countries, including deportations, arrests, investigations, police violence, withdrawals from press conferences or requests for public apologies.⁶

The pandemic also has negative consequences for the economic status of journalists, which is confirmed by the research of the International Federation of Journalists.⁷ Three out of four journalists faced official restrictions, obstructions or intimidation in reporting on COVID-19, two thirds of media workers faced redundancies and non-payment of wages, loss of employment or deterioration of working conditions, while almost every freelance journalist has lost income or a job opportunity, according to a survey of 1,300 journalists in 77 countries. Many respondents said the situation with media freedoms in their countries had deteriorated, with one in four journalists reporting difficulties in accessing information from government or official sources, many pointing out that they had been verbally assaulted by politicians, and some had been restricted the

opportunity to ask questions at press conferences or to have limited movement during a crisis.

The complex situation that complicates the working conditions of journalists and influences the quality of media contents does not give priority to the ethics in media work. It is closely linked to media independence, which is directly affected by the financial sustainability of the media in times of crisis. However, it is essential to have in mind the warning of the World Health Organization, according to which, in parallel with the pandemic, the so-called “infodemia”, which implies an influx of information, both accurate and inaccurate, makes it difficult for people to access credible and reliable sources of information.

For these reasons, many international organizations working in the field of human rights, freedoms and security, as well as in the field of media, issued recommendations and guidelines for journalists, media workers, authorities and media organizations on ways to work together in the direction to provide professional, comprehensive and timely information to citizens in times of crisis. Various actors have undertaken a number of initiatives for monitoring of freedom of expression and information or activities to pressure governments to ensure the right to freedom of expression and information.

5 International Press Institute (2020) *COVID-19: Number of Media Freedom Violations by Region*, available at: <https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-monitoring/>, accessed on: 28.08.2020.

6 Репортери без граници (2020) *#Tracker 19 - Live updates of Covid-19 impacts of press freedom*, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/tracker19-Coronavirus-Covid19>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

7 IFJ (2020) *Exposed: The crisis facing journalism in the face of Covid-19*, IFJ, 30.04.202, available at: <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/exposed-the-crisis-facing-journalism-in-the-face-of-covid-19.html>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

International media organizations recommend that self-regulation is one of the mechanisms that can provide professional media reporting in times of crisis and comprehensive and credible information for citizens. According to Guy Berger, Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO highlights that “press councils are crucial in raising standards in the profession, in defending the profession and in convincing the public that it has the ability to respond”⁸.

Self-regulatory bodies in the period since the beginning of the pandemic had to adapt their work to the new circumstances and continue to function uninterrupted, and their contribution is of crucial importance in correcting media practices and fulfilling the public interest. The self-regulatory body in the Republic of North Macedonia has continued to receive complaints and reactions

about media coverage during the pandemic. It has also continued raising the awareness about the need for professional and ethical treatment of coronavirus-related information and content.

This research aims to provide a comparative overview of the experiences, practices and challenges faced by press councils, which are part of the Alliance for Independent Press Councils of Europe - AIPCE) for various aspects of media reporting related to the crisis. Documents, guidelines, recommendations and mechanisms of international organizations and associations working in the field of media were reviewed and interviews conducted with representatives of 13 press councils from Europe and beyond, i.e. members and associate members of the Alliance, whose experiences and practices related to the media coverage during the pandemic are presented in the analysis.

8 Berger, G. (2020) *COVID-19 and the Media: The Role of Journalism in a Global Pandemic*, 7th OSCE South East Europe Media Conference, The New Frontline: Working Together to Foster Media Freedom, 17-18.09.2020, available at: <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/462792>, accessed on 17-18.09.2020.

2

Overview of recommendations and guidelines for protection of freedom of expression and information in times of crisis

The restrictive measures introduced by the countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic imposed different conditions for the work of the institutions and the journalists, both globally and in North Macedonia. The question of how media professionals and media cope with the work in the new circumstances and how it affects the quality of reporting and information received by citizens raises more topics:

1. Do media organizations have standards and guidelines for work, their own or from relevant national and international organizations for a state of crisis and emergency?
2. What initiatives, activities and other mechanisms of cooperation were initiated and implemented at the international level for the protection of the right to expression and information during the crisis?

2.1. Overview of recommendations and guidelines for protection of freedom of expression and information in times of crisis

One of the relevant documents contained in the Guidelines for Protecting Freedom of Expression and Information in Times of Crisis⁹ was adopted in 2007 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Following the start of the coronavirus crisis in early 2020, on the basis of these Guidelines, as well as on the basis of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Council of Europe prepared

the document “Mitigating a Global Health Crisis while Maintaining Freedom of Expression and information”¹⁰, which emphasizes the key role of the media in times of crisis, in parallel with the increased responsibility they have to provide timely and accurate information to the public, but also to prevent panic and improve understanding and cooperation with citizens for the necessary restrictions.

The Council of Europe recommends that member states should ensure safety of national and foreign media professionals as much as possible, but not abuse the situation to unnecessarily restrict their rights, such as freedom of movement and access to information. Authorities should regularly,

9 Council of Europe (2007) *Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis*, available at: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805ae60e, accessed on 29.08.2020.

10 Council of Europe (2020) *Mitigating a Global Health Crisis While Maintaining Freedom of Expression and Information*, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/en-mitigating-a-global-health-crisis-while-maintaining-freedom-of-expr/16809e2d1e>, accessed on 29.08.2020.

without discrimination, provide information to all media professionals and refrain from misusing defamation laws and other legislation to limit freedom of expression (e.g. defamation lawsuits). States should, above all, strive to maintain favorable environment for the functioning of independent and professional media, as well as provide support for investigative journalism and pluralistic media, including the public service.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the world has faced the phenomenon of “massive infodemic”, as the World Health Organization called the influx of a huge amount of information related to coronavirus through all sources of information, while citizens being unable to distinguish between credible news from lies and disinformation. The Council of Europe assesses that the response of the countries to the “infodemic” can be described as effective in those that had transparent communication on part of the governments and enabled the public to access credible information.¹¹ On the other hand, the Council of Europe warns that the approach of governments that have chosen to decide what is right and what is wrong can lead to censorship and repression of legitimate concerns.¹²

Therefore, the general recommendations of the Council of Europe for media professionals are to adhere to the highest professional and ethical standards, bearing in mind their responsibility in crisis situations to provide the public with timely, credible, accurate and comprehensive information. Media in times of crisis should be especially careful to prevent and do not reinforce unverified contents (especially those from anonymous private forums, chat applications or social media) and to prevent the spread of disinformation and misinformation.¹³

The Council of Europe points to self-regulation as one of the most appropriate mechanisms that can ensure that media professionals act responsibly and professionally and recommends that it should be supported in order to be more effective in times of crisis.¹⁴ Therefore, cooperation among self-regulatory bodies at regional and European level is encouraged.

In relation to wider institutional action in times of crisis, the Council of Europe refers to the possibility of establishing forums or mechanisms for dialogue between governments and stakeholders, in the direction of protecting freedom of expression and

11 Council of Europe (2020) *Mitigating a Global Health Crisis While Maintaining Freedom of Expression and Information*, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/en-mitigating-a-global-health-crisis-while-maintaining-freedom-of-expr/16809e2d1e>, accessed on 29.08.2020.

12 *ibid.*

13 Disinformation refers to intentional (often orchestrated) efforts aimed at confusing or manipulating people by providing and sharing inaccurate information, and misinformation refers to wrong information aimed at misleading someone, but they are created or widespread without manipulative or malicious intent. For more, look at: Ireton, Cheryl, Posetti, Julie (2020) *Journalism, fake news and disinformation*, Paris: UNESCO, available at: <https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1194/Priracnik-za-obrazovanje-i-obuka-po-novinarstvo.pdf>, accessed on: 1.09.2020.

14 Council of Europe (2007) *Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protecting freedom of expression and information in times of crisis*, available at: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805ae60e, accessed on 29.08.2020.

information, and together with academic institutions and civil society organizations to help the public recognize disinformation and misinformation and develop resilience to those related to health. Governments, Internet intermediaries and media stakeholders should work together to prevent the misuse of their networks as channels for disinformation and manipulation of public opinion, and greater importance should be given to trusted sources of news and information, especially those that they are communicated by public health authorities, the Council of Europe document indicates¹⁵. In the context of this commitment, the role of media self-regulatory bodies is especially important.

UNESCO started an action to support the media, improve access to information and the use of digital technologies in the fight against the pandemic. Examples of good practices, priorities, establishing of partnerships, advice and technical assistance, as well as support for mutual cooperation, can be found in the UNESCO Resource Center¹⁶.

According to the organization, all stakeholders should try to oppose “disinfodemic” by respecting international human rights standards, such as the right to freedom of expression, access to

information and privacy. It is especially important to provide credible information through open access by governments. UNESCO promotes access to as much information as possible as a basis for knowledge, such as evidence-based science/facts and policies and the contribution of journalism to them. At the same time, UNESCO recommends promotion of media and information literacy in schools and faculties, in order for citizens to acquire the critical thinking skills necessary to deal with disinformation. Multisectoral cooperation among all parties concerned is particularly important in the fight against the pandemic and the ‘disinfodemic’. UNESCO points out that the media industry and media organizations need support from technology companies in the form of donations or distribution of advertising revenue, support from governments, such as economic packages, tax relief, subsidies, donations, etc., as well as guarantees for editorial independence and media pluralism.¹⁷

Since the start of the pandemic, media freedom organizations that monitor media freedom have warned that the pandemic has brought to light and exacerbated the many crises that threaten the right to free, independent, diverse and credible reporting,¹⁸ and some governments, as a response to the health crisis, detain journalists for critical

15 Council of Europe (2020) *Mitigating a Global Health Crisis While Maintaining Freedom of Expression and Information*, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/en-mitigating-a-global-health-crisis-while-maintaining-freedom-of-expr/16809e2d1e>, accessed on 29.08.2020.

16 YHECKO (2020) *Resource center of responses to COVID-19*, available at: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/communicationinformationresponse/mediasupport?mc_cid=2599701b2e&mc_eid=548063de57&utm_term=0_898ed31396-2599701b2e-442381685, accessed on 30.08.2020.

17 UNESCO (2020) *Journalism, press freedom and COVID-19*, UNESCO, available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_covid_brief_en.pdf, page. 17, accessed on 31.08.2020.

reporting, expand oversight and enact new laws to punish “fake news”, and they even decide for themselves what is allowed and what is false without the oversight of relevant independent bodies.¹⁹

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has taken several initiatives since the beginning of the pandemic, such as the establishment of the *Global Platform for Quality Journalism*, highlighting the seriousness of the crisis consequences for societies, and the fact that it can last. The Federation recommended measures to support media professionals²⁰, to preserve and protect jobs in the media industry, and to promote a sustainable, ethical, and publicly supported information economy. According to the Federation, governments should give priority to supporting journalists who do not have a secure job. The call covers issues related to trade union rights, media transparency, media pluralism and diversity, reform of media ownership rules, as well as copyright.

to media coverage, ARTICLE 19 provides some concrete recommendations²¹, addressing them to more actors. Thus, states and governments should proactively present information related to the spread of the pandemic and should facilitate access to information based on legislation related to freedom of information. Public authorities must not spread misinformation and governments should not conduct propaganda or disinformation campaigns. It is necessary for the government to provide an environment for the work of free, independent and diverse media and it must not attack journalists who report on COVID-19. ARTICLE 19 considers that media and journalists should proactively report on disinformation, propaganda and discrimination by the state or other actors. The support of an effective system of self-regulation by media and journalists is one of the frequent recommendations from several international organizations, in order to ensure the right to correction and response, which is especially relevant in the context of reporting during the COVID-19 crisis. However, priority in the journalistic reporting is adherence to the highest ethical standards, including the principles

In response to the COVID-19 crisis in relation

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- 18 Reporters without Borders (2020) *2020 World Press freedom Index: Entering a decisive decade for journalism, exacerbated by coronavirus*, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.
- 19 Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists of the Council of Europe (2020) *Attacks on media in Europe must not become a new normal*, Strasbourg, 29.04.2020, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/-/annual-report>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.
- 20 IFJ (2020) *Global Platform for Quality Journalism*, available at: https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Platform_English.pdf, accessed on: 27.08.2020.
- 21 Article 19 (2020) *Policy brief – Viral lies: Misinformation and the Coronavirus*, ARTICLE 19, 20.03.2020, available at: <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-final.pdf>. стр. 15-17, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

or equality, without bias and stereotypes, as well as without unnecessary mention of race, national and ethnic origin. With regard to social platforms, ARTICLE 19 considers that they should have clear and comprehensible policies, especially for dealing

with misinformation and hate speech, as well as engage in partnerships when it comes to countering hate speech and misinformation, such as with the WHO or fact-finding services.

2.2 Initiatives of international organizations for protection of freedom of expression and freedom of information during crisis

Initiatives of international organizations and institutions to deal with the consequences of the coronavirus crisis in the field of media are aimed at initiating dialogue, campaigns, exchange of experiences and initiating reactions or exerting pressure on governments to protect media rights and freedoms.

The World Health Organization (WHO), in order to prevent the spread of virus-related disinformation, has begun to actively cooperate with social

networks and other technology companies, as well as with the governments of some countries²². This is important, given that many fake posts are shared among users, and are taken over by traditional and online media. The WHO conducts campaigns, prepares educational videos and trainings for various target groups, including the media and journalists. The organization has, among other resources, a website with a section for audience tips dedicated to debunking myths about the coronavirus²³, which is also useful for media professionals who can verify their information.

A number of organizations have appealed to governments and international organizations to protect journalists and freedom of information. Reporters Without Borders called on the

22 WHO (2020) Website section: *How to report misinformation online*, available at: <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

23 WHO (2020) Website section: *Corona disease: advice for the public: Mythbusters*, available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

Secretary-General of the United Nations and the World Health Organization to declare together that the right to information is an integral part of the right to health, to condemn violations of media freedom committed in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic (or it is used as an excuse) and to call for measures to protect journalists and media so that they can carry out their essential work of providing news and information.²⁴

The European institutions, aware that the pandemic has seriously affected the media sector, have expressed concern that the poor financial condition of media could affect the provision of

clear and factual information and the ability to prevent disinformation about the pandemic. On April 17, 2020, the Europarliamentarians adopted a resolution according to which the disinformation about COVID-19 is a big problem in public health, and the citizens, in fact, should have access to accurate and verified information, since democracy requires free, independent and financially stable media²⁵. In March 2020, to address the critical situation facing the media, the EU allocated € 5.1 million to fund projects for identifying and preventing violations of media freedom, to identify risks to pluralism and to support cross-border investigations²⁶.

2.3 Practical tips and tools for media professionals in times of crisis

The general guidelines provided by international organizations in their documents have been operationalized by various media outlets and

organizations into practical tips and tools useful for dealing with and reporting on the crisis.

Thus, the BBC Media Action offers 10 tips²⁷ for the media during the “infodemic” regarding building contacts with health professionals and other important collaborators for journalists, informing about the basic aspects of the virus, coordinating

24 RSF (2020) *UN Secretary-general and WHO-director-general asked to issue joint appeal*, 16.04.2020, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/un-secretary-general-and-who-director-general-asked-issue-joint-appeal>, accessed on: 24.08.2020.

25 European Parliament (2020) *Protecting press freedom during the Covid-19 pandemic*, 29.04.2020. available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20200423STO77709/protecting-press-freedom-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

26 *ibid.*

27 Internews (2020) *Tools for news reporting during social distancing*, Internews, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmmediaaction/entries/1f096f1c-88d1-4084-9806-ae5125b983fc>, accessed on: 25.08.2020

with health professionals and public authorities, providing credible and accurate information to the public, to prevent the spread of the virus, finding reliable sources of information, presenting positive content or interacting with the audience.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has prepared specific advices for media workers on their safety and psychological stability, protection of their own health and the health of others, protection and cleaning of equipment from contamination, as well as preparing of their own medical protective

equipment and for the digital security.²⁸

Given that many media workers were and are forced to do some of their work remote, through the intensive use of digital technologies, Internews offers a range of practical tips for journalists working at home. The list contains recommendations for programs for remote work, recording interviews, audio interviews, editing video content, downloading transcripts, tips on how to reach the audience and on which platforms or provides links to available training.²⁹

2.4 North Macedonia: transparency of institutions and support for media self-regulation is necessary

In the Republic of North Macedonia, as elsewhere in the world, the crisis found journalists and the media unprepared - they lacked previous experience in crisis situations, appropriate equipment and knowledge to use digital technologies, faced economic pressures and problems with certain

restrictive measures imposed by the Government. Half-truths, misinformation, disinformation and biased reporting, sensationalism and plagiarism were just some of the consequences of the media coverage during the pandemic.

The production and dissemination of disinformation and misinformation in North Macedonia intensified in the period February-July 2020, because on July 12, 2020, early parliamentary elections were held. These two topics, the pandemic and the elections,

28 CPJ (2020) *PJ Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus pandemic*, 14.08.2020, available at: <https://cpj.org/2020/02/cpj-safety-advisory-covering-the-coronavirus-outbr/#2>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

29 Internews (2020) *Tools for news reporting during social distancing*, 22.04.2020, available at: <https://internewscovid19.org/2020/04/22/tools-for-news-reporting-during-social-distancing/>, accessed on: 25.08.2020

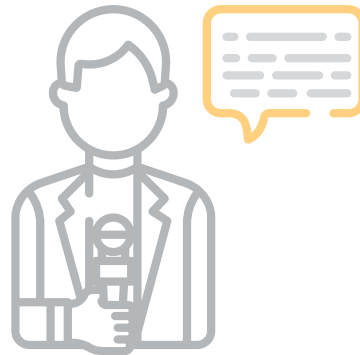
were often intertwined in the political agendas of different actors, and politicization of the crisis was noticed in some media.³⁰

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia received 84 press complaints from January to June 2020, which is almost as many as the whole of the past year. Between March and August 2020, 70% of complaints to the Council concerned coronavirus-related media coverage.

Some institutions announced monitoring and sanctioning of persons and media that publish misinformation on social networks regarding Covid-19, as well as changes in the legislation that would prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation related to the virus. Media organizations in North Macedonia appealed that greater transparency of institutions and support

for media self-regulation are the most effective mechanisms to combat these phenomena. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia and the Council of Media Ethics have published the brochure “Guidelines for safe and professional reporting on coronavirus”³¹ in order to help journalists, professional interlocutors and citizens to distinguish between legitimate and reliable sources of information and speculation, half-truths and propaganda, on the other side.

The regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, has allocated 103 million denars (1,672,246 euros) as first aid for the media in North Macedonia, in order to protect employees, purchase protective equipment and cover costs of producing programs, as a measure to compensate for the financial consequences of the crisis.



30 Council of Media Ethics (2020) *CMEM reacts to unethical and unprofessional reporting*, Skopje: CMEM, available at: <https://semm.mk/soopsht-enija/756-semm-reagira-za-neetichni-i-neprofesionalno-izvesuvanje>, accessed on: 25.08.2020.

31 Tuneva, M. and Janevski, O. (2020) *Guidelines for safe and professional reporting on the coronavirus*, Skopje: AJM, available at: <https://bit.ly/2RM860k>, accessed on: 24.08.2020.

3

The most common breaches of professional media reporting – experiences from several press councils

Media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked mixed reactions from the public. Citizens complained on media exaggerating or neglecting problems, violating basic reporting standards, and criticized the irresponsibility of journalists and media workers (for not wearing masks and disregarding physical distance). Press councils often receive complaints that are in line with conspiracy theories: “The coronavirus is a project, it is not incurable, we have a ‘cure’!” “The virus was patented in 2015!”³²

The following are the experiences of press councils that are members or associate members of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE), drawn from in-depth interviews or participation in the webinar on “The Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils”, realized on May 6, 2020.

The general overview of the situation in countries where press councils operate, whose representatives were interviewed, gives the impression that the most common problems are related to sensationalist reporting in the media, insufficient protection of privacy and personal data and difficult access to information. On the other hand, despite the fact that the press councils worked on processing complaints received from the public, which is their primary function, they actively advocated for the protection of freedom of expression, reacted when the freedoms and rights of the media were threatened, and realized numerous awareness raising activities on the need for professionalism in journalism.

3.1 Reactions to general media reporting and to unverified information

The spread of false, unverified and half-truthful information about the coronavirus, their sharing either on social media or in other media, as well as the speed of their spread cause very frequent

reactions in the public. The need to adhere to basic standards for professional and ethical reporting on the pandemic is being emphasized more than ever. Journalism plays a key role in providing credible, balanced and reliable information in tackling myths and speculation.

Violation of Article 1 of the Code of Journalists of Macedonia, which refers to the publication

³² Excerpt from a TV-interview on FACE TV in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

of accurate and verified information has been identified in 46% of the cases reported to the Council of Media Ethics, in the period February - July 2020.³³

Cases of incorrect or wrongful reporting were also reported to the Estonian Press Council during the crisis, as well as cases of media contents in which no distinction is made between news, opinions and speculations.

It is interesting to note that during the crisis, only two complaints were received in the Press Council in Albania, related to copyright. *“This is due to the fact that the information was completely centralized by the Government. We do not have independent*

*journalism, that is the main problem with the pandemic. There were numbers, but no one knew if they were correct or not.”*³⁴

Journalistic care and data verification, i.e. the observed shortcomings in the media coverage of the coronavirus, are often the subject of complaints in the German Press Council. Complaints have also been received from people who have felt hurt by critical and controversial comments about so-called conspiracy theories, according to which there are hidden plans for the pandemic.

The most common reactions to the Press Council in Finland during the crisis were related to allegations that the media failed to correct an essential error.

3.2 Sensational reporting and hidden advertising

One of the most commonly reported problems when it comes to media reporting is the sensationalist approach to dealing with pandemic-related topics. The remarks in the reactions referred to the vocabulary in the reporting, as well as to the approach in dealing with the topics and information related to the crisis.

Violation of article 8 from the Code of Journalists which refers to sensational reporting is identified in 31% of the cases in the period February – August 2020.

Cases of reporting containing sensationalist information, i.e. violation of section 14 of the German Code of Ethics³⁵ were frequently reported to the Press Council in Germany during the crisis. *“Some headlines have suggested that a cure for*

33 Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (2020), *CMEM debate: How the coronavirus crisis affected journalism and self-regulation?*, available at: <https://semm.mk/1proekti/tekovni-proekti/kanadski-fond-za-ravoj/aktivnosti/770-27-2020>, accessed on: 31.08.2020.

34 Interview with Koloreto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, conducted on 12.08.2020.

35 According to this section of the Code, reporting on health topics should not be of unnecessary sensational nature, given that it may lead to unfounded hopes or fears among readers.

*Covia-19 may have been found and that there have been groundbreaking research findings.*³⁶

Clickbait headlines such as “Coronavirus can not survive”, “Coronavirus medicine starts selling tomorrow” are some of the journalistic articles that have been reported to the Bosnian Press Council. In addition, the self-regulatory body found that in such content no distinction was made between a journalistic article and an advertisement.

The lack of a clear distinction between journalistic content and advertising was also a reason for reaction to the German Press Council. One such example is the interview for the sale of nasal spray. “There was a conversation with a researcher who was selling the drug, explaining that it was a great way

to boost immunity and that it could help fight the coronavirus. According to our adjudication, it was a serious violation of the Code, because it is a matter of a hidden advertising, and it was estimated that it could lead to unfounded hopes.”³⁷

Half of all complaints to the Irish Press Council during the state of emergency are also related to sensationalist reporting, which is predominantly related to headlines.

Concerned citizens also reacted to the Flemish Press Council in Belgium with questions about sensationalist reporting, i.e. mostly for headlines that give false and unfounded hopes or those that can upset and shock people who are sick.

3.3 Insufficient protection of privacy and personal data

As the pandemic spread, so did concerns about privacy and data protection in media reporting. Cases in which these principles have been violated have often been reported to press councils in several countries.

Cases related to the disclosure of the identity of persons infected with the coronavirus have been reported to the German Press Council. At the beginning of the crisis, the authorities published some information related to the first wave of coronavirus spread in northeastern Germany, after which a newspaper conducted a larger investigation and found that it was a small village, which is identified in the report. It has sparked a

36 Volkmann – Schluck, S. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, пристапено на: 27.08.2020.

37 Ibid.

debate over whether the public interest in finding out where the first coronavirus outbreak occurred is greater than protecting the identities of those living in the area. The Guidelines for Journalistic Work of the German Press Code clearly state that “physical or mental illness or injury is in the domain of the privacy of those affected” (Guidelines 8.4).

Cases have been reported to the Irish Press Council when certain newspapers published the names of people infected with Covid-19, which provoked negative public reactions. *“However, the newspapers were very careful and identified only those who agreed to it. There may always be an argument in the public interest, but identifying individuals is a hasty step.”*³⁸

A problem is not only the naming of those infected with Covid-19 and the victims, but also the publication of details about the persons in the media coverage. An example of this is the case of a teenage skier for the Swedish national junior team, who was the first to be infected with the coronavirus in a small town of 10,000 people in Sweden. The newspaper that reported the case did not name the boy, but published the name of his school, then the fact that he was a skier for the national team, the hospital where he was placed, as well as details about the illness. *“Even though he was not named, the line has been crossed regarding his privacy. My question is, is*

*the public interest so strong during a crisis that we have to accept intrusion into private life?”*³⁹

A similar case has been reported in the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. More specifically, a small municipality posted on its website a list of people infected with the virus, including their identity and residential address. A number of media outlets republished the list, and the explanation of the municipality is that in that way an attempt was made to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and to protect the citizens. After receiving a complaint about the text, it was immediately removed from the media, although it can still be found on other portals, for which no complaints have been received.

In some countries, there have been reactions to the publication of photographs by medics. Such an example is registered in the self-regulatory body in the UK IPSO. The reaction refers to photographers who were stationed in front of the entrance of a very famous hospital, waiting for the arrival of ambulances, in an attempt to take photos while the patients were being taken down. The health staff themselves pointed out that in conditions when they are under extreme pressure and go through very difficult times, such behavior is offensive. “For us, as a self-regulatory body, it was an interesting question about what are the

38 Feeney, P. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

39 Sigvardsson, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

rights of medical workers in these circumstances, because under normal circumstances we would explain that they are in focus of the public and are presented in a professional light, and that is not in the domain of the private”⁴⁰.

In Belgium, meanwhile, there were reactions to a case when a journalist was infiltrated into a Facebook group where doctors were exchanging messages about the coronavirus. Based on the information, the journalist contacted the doctor with a request for more details about a specific case, which he considered intrusive. The journalist apologized, explaining that the Facebook group had been opened and she had become a member.

“The question is, is this really an infiltration given that a Facebook group is open and can a journalist’s membership be considered some kind of ‘incognito’ or covert journalism?”⁴¹

Disclosure of identity is considered acceptable if it is a public figure, but not if it is a citizen. *“We had a case of a famous lawyer who became infected with Covid-19, was hospitalized and fell into a coma. A “yellow” newspaper revealed his identity and published a photo. But it is not relevant to know that he is in a coma due to illness. On the other hand, it is known to a certain part of the population, but not to everyone. All the elements should always be considered and the right balance made.”⁴²*



3.4 Difficult access to information

Given the role of press councils in protecting media freedom, access to information is an issue that is also part of their commitment.

“Even if the mission does not allow us to work directly on the issue of access to information, it is

entirely acceptable to make statements and discuss this issue.”⁴³

In Norway, media organizations pressured the government to publish more information amid health institutions and the police resisting to provide the necessary information to the media. *“There are different ways of publishing information in different hospitals. And some hospitals did not*

40 Dewar, C. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

41 Knapen, P. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on 27.08.2020.

42 Warzilek, A. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.press-councils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

43 Sigvardsson, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.press-councils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

even give us information on how many people were hospitalized with Covid-19. This has made it difficult for the media to inform the public.”⁴⁴

Journalists and about 30 journalists’ associations strongly reacted in France, in condemnation of the authorities’ initiative to publish newspaper articles that are rated as good information for Covid-19, in order to deal with fake news. “Only articles that were not critical of Government’s policy were selected and published on the website of the Ministry of Health. The Ministry selected only newspapers from Paris and information from the AFP news agency, but not from other places in France. It provoked a strong reaction.”⁴⁵

The Finnish Press Council has been involved in monitoring access to coronavirus-related information in different parts of the country, in terms of the number of infected and hospitalized people. “It is part of the Council’s competences regarding the protection of freedom of speech, and access to information is an essential part of freedom of speech, in accordance with the Finnish Constitution.”⁴⁶

The limited access to information for the media and the fact that the role of informing was taken over by the Government, which published information on social networks, was the reason for a strong reaction from the Press Council in Albania. “We had to publicly react and demand that the Government should be more open and provide access to journalists and newsrooms. But they did not respond to our request. I believe that they base this on the philosophy that in this way the audience is protected. They are trying to protect the public by being hermetically closed in relation to information.”⁴⁷

Due to the crisis, press conferences often begin to be organized online, placing certain restrictions on journalists and media workers’ access to information. “Journalists were expected to send their questions early in the morning, and only two questions per media were allowed. The biggest problem is that we have big affairs in political life, related to public procurement around state aid. With one or two questions, journalists cannot receive full answers.”⁴⁸ With the easing of health measures, journalists

44 Floborghagen, E., Sigvardsson, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-content published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

45 Ganz, P., Sigvardsson, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-content published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

46 Interview with Eero Hyvonen, Press Council in Finland, conducted on 27.08.2020

47 Cukali, K., (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-content published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

48 Bahto Kestendzic, M., (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-content published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.

attended press conferences, but only a limited number of media outlets, while some institutions banned journalists from attending such events.

Similar problems have been reported to the Press Council in North Macedonia. *“There was a lack of interaction with the interlocutors, officials became more comfortable in their statements. Although there*

was an opportunity to ask questions, there were still subtle restrictions due to the duration of the press conferences and the technical possibilities of the journalists to visit the events. All this turned journalism from a dynamic to a sluggish profession, which was in favor of those who wanted to stay away from the public eye.”⁴⁹



49 Koka, F. (2020) “How the coronavirus crisis affected journalism and media self-regulation”, available at: <https://www.semm.mk/1proekti/te-kovni-proekti/kanadski-fond-za-ravoj/aktivnosti/770-27-2020>, accessed on: 30.08.2020.

4

Other activities by the press councils: awareness raising is of key importance

4.1 Press releases and public reactions

Most press councils, in addition to handling complaints, are involved in other types of activities during the pandemic. This usually means publishing press releases and issuing of public reactions, to react to various phenomena related to the threat to freedom of information, freedom of the media, as well as for the negative practices in media reporting.

In Albania, there have been reactions to Government's pressure on the media and attempts to silence critical media or blogs. "We had to appear in public and ask the Government not to abuse the state of emergency to censor the media. We had to retaliate when the Government blamed the media for the pandemic and for 'installing' panic. The Prime Minister literally considered the media as 'infodemic', urging people not to trust them."⁵⁰

A topic that became very relevant during the pandemic in Germany is the protection of journalists who covered demonstrations. The so-called "coronavirus deniers" regularly gathered to protest the Government's measures, such as wearing protective masks and the like.

During these demonstrations, TV crews and other journalists were regularly attacked, and some had to stop filming or stop reporting. The Press Council issued a warning on Twitter and a statement saying such developments were threatening media freedom. Other organizations also reacted, such as journalists' unions.

On March 22, Ukrainian media outlets disseminated news report based on Patriarch Filaret's interview with Ukrainian Channel 4. In particular, Filaret noted that coronavirus pandemic originated and spread "through same-sex marriages" and called for taking communion in religious buildings during the quarantine period. *"The Commission on Journalism Ethics, as a self-regulatory body of journalists and editorial offices, is concerned and condemns the dissemination in the media of hate speech related to the LGBT community and the calls for disregard for quarantine requirements. This fact raises especially serious concern at a difficult time for Ukraine and the whole world, when dissemination of fake news and misinformation can lead to increased aggression in society and the lack of complete and impartial information triggers the spread of conspiracy and antiscientific statements and encourages the audience to look for "culprits" instead of ways to solve a problem."*⁵¹

50 Interview with Koloreto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, conducted on 12.08.2020.

51 Interview with Liza Kuzmenko, member of the Commission on Journalism Ethics in Ukraine, conducted on 19.08.2020

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, since the appearance of the first case of coronavirus in the country, in February issued a press release⁵² requesting careful and responsible reporting on the coronavirus. The media were urged not to contribute to the spread of untruths and create panic among the public, as well as not to make assessments of a possible escalation of events. A similar call was made at the beginning of the crisis by the Austrian Press Council and the Bosnian Press Council. The importance of following and adhering to ethical standards and the Code is emphasized, not inciting of unfounded hopes and fears, and the public is urged to react to misinformation, false news and disturbing information.

Two complaints, one about a false health claim and the other about an identified hospitalized person, prompted the Belgian German-speaking Press Council to respond immediately to inform

the media as quickly as possible to avoid spreading such news and footage.

Representatives of the Finnish Press Council in March asked the media to clearly label Government's statements, which would allow the public to distinguish them from journalistic content. "Otherwise, in March, the Finnish Parliament passed the Law on Emergency Situations, which allows the Government to publish its statements as such in the media, provided that the information is urgently needed to control the spread of the pandemic. The law was repealed three weeks later."⁵³

At the beginning of the movement restrictions in Germany, the Press Council, together with journalists' associations and newspaper associations, issued a statement warning that restrictions must not jeopardize freedom of expression.

4.2 Preparation of ethical guidelines for the media

Some of the press councils, in the run-up to the pandemic, have also developed guidelines with ethical standards for media professionals in times

of crisis, based on international standards and recommendations, as well as codes of ethics in their countries.

In March, the Press Council in North Macedonia and the Association of Journalists, in the interest of a better informed public and safer journalists and

52 CMEM (2020) *Careful and responsible reporting on the coronavirus* Skopje, CMEM, available at: <https://semm.mk/soopshtenija/696-vnimatel-no-i-odgovorno-izvestuvanje-okolu-korona-virusot>, accessed on: 23.08.2020.

53 Interview with Eero Hyvonen, conducted on 27.08.2020

media workers in the performance of their day-to-day professional duties, prepared a publication entitled: “Guidelines for Safe and Professional Reporting on the Coronavirus”⁵⁴. The publication is a kind of manual for ethical, professional and responsible reporting of the coronavirus in a world pandemic. It also talks about standard precautionary measures, and provides recommendations to journalists and media workers for reporting on the field, as well as guidelines for editorial work and guest appearances in shows.

That same month, the Press Council in Bosnia

and Herzegovina, the Journalists’ Association, the Communications Regulatory Agency, and the Association “Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, with the support of a number of journalists and media, adopted “Guidelines for acting in times of crisis.”⁵⁵ The media were reminded of the importance of accurate, responsible and careful reporting, especially in this type of circumstances.

The Press Council in Albania has also produced and distributed Guidelines for Reporting on the Pandemic based on the Guidelines previously published by UNESCO.

4.3 Building partnerships and networks of cooperation

Effective media self-regulation, as one of the mechanisms for protection of freedom of expression, freedom of the media and promotion of their professionalism, requires cooperation with various actors in society. Hence, the cooperation and partnership with the civil society sector, the media and their associations, with the institutions and the citizens proves to be very important for the ethics councils. These are some of the key recommendations of international organizations that prepare recommendations for the protection

of freedom of expression and information in times of crisis.

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia individually, but also in partnership with the Association of Journalists, as well as with the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers has repeatedly reacted to attempts to put pressure on journalists in the execution of their professional activities.

Attempts have been made in Albania to build a network of organizations that would respond to restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedoms.

54 Tuneva, M. and Janeski, O. (2020) *Guidelines for safe and professional reporting on the coronavirus*, Skopje: AJM, available at: <https://bit.ly/2RM860k>, accessed on: 24.08.2020.

55 Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020) *Guidelines for Acting in Times of Crisis*, 17.04.2020, available at: <https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/vijesti/aktuelnosti/3936-smjernice-djelovanja-u-periodu-krize>, accessed on: 20.08.2020.

In early April 2020, the Government of Serbia decided that all information regarding the coronavirus could be communicated exclusively to the Crisis Response Team headed by the Prime Minister. Due to the attempts of the state to centralize the coverage of the pandemic in Serbia, all journalists and media associations in Serbia protested, resulting in lifting of the measure after only two days. Otherwise, the Serbian Press Council continuously cooperates with the organizations that are its founders and together indicate the obligation for professional reporting.

At the beginning of the crisis, in Belgium, the National Security Center asked the Press Council for information on the ethical standards that apply to journalists in times of crisis, and they were referred to the Code and guidelines on how to report during emergencies. This has resulted in specific discussions between the National Security Center and the Association of Professional Journalists

to remind media professionals and authorities of the standards for reporting on health issues or adapting them to practice, without restricting media freedom. At the beginning of the crisis, the Broadcasting Media Regulatory Body also publicly emphasized the need for quality and professional media coverage.

In Finland, there is a dynamic dialogue with civil society organizations, both on a regular basis and during the pandemic. Regular communication with the founding organizations, more specifically with the two major publishing associations and the two major journalistic unions, also takes place in Germany.

The National NewsMedia Council in Canada has had strong links with academia, civil society organizations and other journalistic bodies since its founding, which is certainly a great advantage in tackling the challenges of the pandemic.



5

Self-sustainability is among the strongest challenges of the press councils during the pandemic

One strong challenge for the press councils, which is not new, but which is expected to intensify with the pandemic, is the lack of self-sustainability and financial resources for the functioning of self-regulatory bodies.

Such a challenge is most faced by press councils in the Balkan region, whose funding depends solely on donor assistance. *“Some of the donors have decided to postpone calls for support. It also affected the work of the Press Council in North Macedonia. And the media themselves have huge problems as a result of declining advertising revenues.”*⁵⁶

The Board of Directors of the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina has asked the authorities for urgent intervention to help the media and the Council⁵⁷, which is struggling to secure financial support for the continuation of the mission. *“Unfortunately, we still only depend on projects without stable and long-term financial assistance.”*⁵⁸

Concerns about future funding are also expressed by the Irish Press Council. *“In the short*

*term, there was no special impact on us, but we estimate that if this continues in the second half of the year, we will have a serious problem with funding. Newspapers will try to save, and the Press Council is fully funded by them.”*⁵⁹

In Sweden, the Press Council is mainly funded by major media organizations and the Swedish Radio and Television. *“So far we have a fairly stable situation. But we assume that the fall of the ads will affect us next year as well. We expect the media to resist paying their organizations, and they, in turn, to pay us.”*⁶⁰

Other challenges include working online, which according to some of the press councils reflects on the speed of resolving complaints without holding face-to-face meetings. In IPSO, the UK, the changed way of working is considered a big challenge. *“We adapted quickly, but have found it hard to replicate the ease of discussion, about the particulars of a complaint or next steps on a case - in a remote setting.”*⁶¹

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- 56 T Tuneva, M. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.
- 57 Press council in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020) *Call For The Authorities Of Bosnia And Herzegovina For Urgent Intervention To Save Media*, 8.05.2020, available: <https://english.vzs.ba/index.php/news-and-events/current-events/3002-call-for-the-authorities-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina-for-urgent-intervention-to-save-media>, accessed on: 16.08.2020.
- 58 Bahto Kestendzic, M. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils* video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.
- 59 Feeney, P. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.press-councils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.
- 60 Sigvardsson, O. (2020) *Impact of the Corona Crisis on Press Councils*, video-contents published on: 06.05.2020, available at: <https://www.presscouncils.eu/impact-of-the-corona-crisis-on-press-councils-webinar>, accessed on: 27.08.2020.
- 61 Interview with Charlotte Dewar, IPSO, conducted on 16.09.2020.

6

Lessons learned – what can press councils initiate in the future?

The presence of misinformation circulating as a result of the crisis is a very worrying phenomenon, and press councils play a big role in dealing with them. *“They can protect the public and enhance the importance of professional journalism by helping mainstream media take appropriate steps to verify information before it is published and make immediate and complete corrections when necessary. They can also promote a public understanding of the difference between unregulated, irresponsible and often unfounded claims circulating on social media and responsible journalism.”*⁶²

The continuous and preventive work of press councils enables journalists and media to improve their practices in crisis situations. *“Press councils must adapt to the circumstances and do more than their primary mission. They must react to protect the media and/or journalists, to be at the forefront of the fight for media freedom.”*⁶³

The German Press Council believes that self-regulatory bodies should be involved in active public relations and promote the media that respect the standards when reporting on Covid-19, but also promote the opportunity for

reactions to the press councils in the form of complaints.

Adeline Hulin from UNESCO believes that *“in countries where people do not use press councils because they do not know they exist or who do not know they have the right to complain for free, it is useful to work on the visibility of the Council”*.⁶⁴

An important goal for the Information Council of Catalunya is to fight fake news in all possible ways and to organize focus groups with civil society organizations and other groups to emphasize the importance of freedom of expression. *“The Covid-19 situation has made us think about how to be more available to citizens and journalists in our mission to protect freedom of expression and professional media reporting.”*⁶⁵

Press councils’ resources (such as recommendations, questions, analysis) posted online provide information for both the audience and the profession.

“Without a doubt, press councils are an effective vehicle to advancing professional journalistic practices in Canada. In a time when science is

62 *ibid.*

63 Interview with Koloreto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, conducted on 12.08.2020.

64 Interview with Adeline Hulin, conducted on 18.08.2020.

65 Interview with Begoña M, conducted on 01.09.2020.

regularly contested between different ideological belief systems, having a professional organization equipped to reinforce proper standards is a part of developing a resilient information ecosystem. In more practical terms, we have also engaged in more member relations by hosting webinars for newsrooms and academic institutions that want to learn more about our work”.⁶⁶

Lessons learned – what can press councils initiate in the future?



66 Interview with Brent Jolly and Cara Sabatini, conducted on 21.08.2020.

7

Conclusions and recommendations:

The experiences and challenges faced by media self-regulatory bodies in different countries during the coronavirus crisis vary from council to a council, but there are also common problems with the journalistic reporting. Among the most common problems are sensationalist media coverage, insufficient protection of privacy and personal data, and difficult access to information.

Press councils, even during the crisis, continued to function smoothly and process complaints received from the public, which is their primary function. However, experience shared by representatives of several councils indicates that throughout the period they actively advocated for the protection of freedom of expression, reacted when media freedoms and rights were threatened, and carried out numerous activities to raise awareness to maintain professional standards in journalism, especially in times of crisis. However, the emerging situation, which imposed demands for adjustments to new ways of working and the advancement of standards, especially in the digital-technological sense, also meant a step forward from the primary missions of the press councils.

Many of the councils reacted proactively through statements and reactions about various phenomena related to the threat to freedom of information and media freedom, as well as to negative media reporting practices. Some of

the press councils, in cooperation with other media organizations, as was the case in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, also prepared guidelines with ethical standards for media professionals in times of crisis during the pandemic.

Access to information was a key problem faced by media and journalists during the pandemic, which was reflected in the work of the press councils. The shared experiences confirm that the health institutions and the authorities restricted the flow of information, as well as the access of the journalists to locations, selected what could be published or limited the questions that the journalists could ask. Some institutions in certain countries have banned the presence or selected which media will be invited, which restricts access to information for both the media and citizens.

To deal with these new situations in a complex time, given that in some countries the coronavirus crisis coincided with the holding of elections, cooperation and partnership with civil society, the media and their associations, institutions and citizens, proved to be very important mechanism for press councils. Multisectoral cooperation between all stakeholders is in line with some of the key recommendations of international organizations for the protection of freedom of expression and information in times of crisis. This is one of the key ways to put pressure on



institutions when they act contrary to human rights principles. For certain phenomena, such as hate speech in the media, it is necessary to coordinate in a timely manner with the competent institutions in order to prevent or sanction this phenomenon.

Cooperation among press councils in times of crisis, as well as in regular circumstances, enables the exchange of useful practices, resulting in effective coordination and timely response to the challenges faced by newsrooms when it comes to their professional work. Coordination of press councils during a pandemic will create a knowledge base and lessons learned and how to act in the future, which in turn leads to the idea of creating a common strategy for action. This may include recommendations for efficient work and tools that will facilitate the work of the commissions that decide on complaints.

Media self-regulation is particularly important in tackling unprofessionalism in media reporting. Self-regulatory bodies should encourage media to play an important role in protecting human rights, both in regular circumstances and in times of crisis. At the same time, they are necessary actors in fostering the power of the media to serve as a forum for different voices to be heard in public discourse.

Self-regulatory bodies can protect the public and enhance the importance of professional journalism by helping the mainstream media take appropriate steps to verify information before it is published and to correct it promptly and completely when necessary. They can also promote a better public understanding of the differences between unregulated, irresponsible and often unfounded claims circulating on social media and responsible fact-based journalism.

However, the lack of self-sustainability and financial resources for the functioning of self-regulatory bodies remains the biggest challenge, especially in times of crisis. Experience has shown that the new situation has imposed more responsibilities and activities on press councils, which have often worked on a voluntary basis in recent months since the pandemic began.

The experience of the work of the press councils in the eight months since the beginning of the crisis raises the question of whether it is necessary to expand the mission of the self-regulatory bodies. Ethics councils must adapt to the circumstances and do more than what is their primary mission, more specifically they must react quickly and in engaging manner to protect the media and / or journalists and contribute to efforts to maintain and promote media freedoms.



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