



Media Freedom and Professional Criteria through an Analysis of Daily News Broadcasts on the National Televisions in the Republic of North Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

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Freedom of speech and expression as one of the fundamental human rights in conditions of a lower degree of democratization of a society increasingly create a state of media dysfunction, informative and analytical reduction and a phenomenon of cognitive atrophy of media messages, especially in the formation of public opinion about significant social issues of political, economic and cultural background. Freedom and responsibility, being two sides of a process in the functioning of the media conditioned by the application of professional standards and criteria, reflects the media culture that influences the formation of public opinion among the audience. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the factors of the development of professional standards and criteria as a significant communication phenomenon that determines the democratic capacity of the contemporary communication reality and the pluralism of citizens' interests. The paper methodologically focuses on the analysis of the central daily news broadcasts which are justified for several reasons. The first reason manifests their representation of a concentrated form of realizing the informative function of the media. The second reasons manifests their high rating compared to other programs and is broadcast in prime time, in the periods when television has the most viewers. Attitudes and opinions, among other things, will be probed through interviews with journalists and expert public in the media sphere.

KEYWORDS:

Informative; Functions; Democracy; Reality; Society

1. INTRODUCTION

The cause-and-effect relationship between democracy and the social arrangement of relations in a state means that the more developed the democratic capacity of the institutions of the system, the greater the freedom of speech and expression of thought, the creative and analytical function of the media and their participatory role as an expression of pluralism of citizens. From there, media freedom implies freedom of expression, freedom of speech, free transmission and dissemination of information in society without restriction. At the same time, this opens up contemporary debates surrounding the issues of media reality, the shaping of media culture and the formation of public opinion. What's more, Dan Nimmo warns of the increasingly common occurrence of "factoids" (processed and packaged information that presents

itself as accurate, true, and original) that replace facts. They are sublimated statements of fact that are generally treated as true, even though there is no evidence to support it. The final effect is a "virtual politics" created by a media-created reality that is manipulated by politicians. (Swanson/Mancini, 1996:270)

Regarding the arbitrariness of the issue surrounding media freedom, where the terms democratic and independent media are connected, the theory shows that the debates surrounding the control of the media through the influence of powerful individuals are also connected. Media freedom is a sensitive herb that requires daily care and should never be surrendered to the promises of politicians, rulers, businessmen, big moguls, highly influential and powerful individuals. They know well the value of the media, and even more how to control it. (Malović, 2004:129)

II. MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

According to the Twentieth World Media Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (May, 2022), there is a doubling of polarization in the media that is amplified by information chaos. The Republic of North Macedonia has jumped 33

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places on the global media freedom index of Reporters Without Borders. The country is ranked 57th out of a total of 180 countries, while in 2021 it was 90th on the list. The greatest progress in the region has been achieved by Montenegro by 41 places, Bulgaria by 21, Kosovo by 17 and Serbia by 14 places, and the biggest decline by Greece by 38, Albania by 20 and Slovenia by 18 places. Since 2022, Reporters Without Borders has been using a new methodology which defines media freedom as "the effective opportunity for journalists, either as individuals or groups, to select, produce and disseminate news and information of public interest, independent of political, economic, legal and social interference, as well as without threats to their physical and mental safety". (Reporters Without Borders Report, May 2022) This means that the new methodology covers five new indicators: political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context and security.

II.I. ABOUT THE ARBITRARINESS OF THE DISCOURSE – MEDIA FREEDOM

If it is understood that one of the determinants of democracy is the absence of censorship, it means that democratic media are those media that offer conditions for freedom of speech and that are not subject to content control. In theory, there are opposing points of view, that is, doubts' concerning the veracity of what has been presented. According to Simon Lee, in our daily life, censors are everywhere around us. We censor each other with a reproachful look, with threats of beatings (Lee, 1990:11) In this context, it should be noted that the discourse of self-regulation is more appropriate, which, some journalists from the media in the Republic of North Macedonia, in the conducted interviews, call it self-censorship of individual texts or treatment of sensitive issues for political, economic or security reasons. In that context, theorists propose a distinction between "regulatory and constitutive censorship". First, regulatory censorship consists of formal institutional mechanisms of mass media content control. In contrast, the second, constitutive censorship refers to internationalized restrictions that are mostly contained in social customs and habits and regulate discourse so that society can act.

II.II. DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS FOR IMPARTIAL MEDIA

Theoretical debates concerning the issue of media bias can be dimensioned through the representative and informative function of the media and through the forms of practicing democracy. Bias can have two obvious harmful consequences for democracy: it can misrepresent the people or misinform them. According to the views of an interviewed editor of a national television in the Republic of North Macedonia, just as the elected representative body should represent the nation, the media should also represent the views, values and tastes of its viewers. Accordingly, representation does not only

mean giving space for officially expressed political and moral views, but also includes representing cultural differences, as well as the manners in which people live and think. The second harmful effect is misinformation – if people use the media to inform themselves about their society and the actions of politicians and if they use that information to make political decisions, then inadequate or inaccurate information can result in a misunderstanding of the political act. (From an interview with a representative of the media sphere)

Impartial media is insisted upon within a democratic society. It assumes two different expectations. The first concerns the possibility of removing bias. It is reasonable to expect the media to offer factual data that may include "important" details (for example, what the peace agreement is about or who the signatories are) that are defined by how they fit into an explanation of the event or determines audience interest (the preference given to domestic news over world news).

According to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky), even today in the modern democratic world, censorship reigns "a means of controlling the truth" and continues to shape reality and relativize human freedom. They believe that the media has a systematically biased view of the world. Their hypothesis is that American newspapers act to maintain the foreign policy interests of the US government – as propagandists for the dominant corporate interests in the US. At the same time, they find and "borrow" the apparently incompatible syntagm manufacturing consent from the writings of one of the leading ideologues of liberal democracy in the USA, Walter Lipman. In his collection of essays - *A Progressive Theory of Liberal Democratic Thought* (*A Progressive Theory of Liberal Democratic Thought*), he actualizes "the concept of production of consent that can lead to a revolution in the practice of democracy (Chomsky, 2002:40)." His idea will be enthusiastically received in business circles. It would even become the main preoccupation of the public relations industry, whose leading figure, Edward Bernay, would describe it as the "wisdom of consent" as the true essence of democracy.

III. PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND CRITERIA THROUGHOUT THE INFORMATIVE FUNCTION OF MEDIA REALITY

The information that reaches the audience is carefully arranged, half-chewed and half-digested, depending on the specific requirements of the media and their political patrons. (Ball, 1997:52-53)

Journalism is defined and functions according to certain mechanisms according to which it must necessarily distinguish between facts and opinions. An opinion is an expression of a personal opinion, it is biased. Media information must strive towards objectivity, statement of facts, balance and impartiality in noting conflicts, interpreting events, without leaning towards one position. This ideal is contained in all journalistic codes. But the existence of those

rules does not mean that they are always respected or could be respected. It could even be said that neutrality is a one-sided, unachievable idea. In order to be neutral one must report facts only. In journalism, there is a syntagm stating that a plethora of information kills information, which means that only arranging the facts without their argumentation, i.e. the cause-and-effect relationship leads to a state of media dysfunction, informative and analytical reduction and a phenomenon of cognitive atrophy of media messages in particular in the formation of public opinion on important socio-political, economic and cultural issues.

In the era of media pluralism, the controversies of objectivity as a professional criterion in the construction of media messages are increasingly being imposed. Objectivity does not mean either accuracy or honesty. For example, honest intentions to present the truth, with reduced facts, inadequate sources, one or two sides, (and at least three sides of the story) and absence of 5+2 questions (who, what, when, where, how, why and with what effect) does not signal objectivity, which implies complexity between the elements of Laswell's paradigm. The truth is not contained within the statement, but within the message of the media information, which should result from proving the facts in their causal connection. The accuracy of the presented sources does not satisfy the criterion of complexity if there is insufficient information to eliminate speculation due to lack of time. Precisely the timeliness, which implies that you don't have to be the first and incomplete in publishing, dimensions objectivity as honesty and truthfulness and complexity, however controversial it may be as a determination of media professional standards and criteria.

The information function consists in collecting, selecting and processing information of a social, public nature at the local, national, regional and world level. That is why the need for information from earlier times, in the modern world, has been transformed into a need for objective, honest, timely and true information. The statements that are received through the informative function of the media inform and teach the recipients, and in this way there may be a disagreement between what is received as a message from the means of mass communication and the own opinion of the recipients. This phenomenon in the sociology of mass communications is called cognitive dissonance, which can be discussed on two levels. The first is when the informational function has the effect of reducing or increasing the dissonance between opinion and behaviour. If the information contributes to harmonizing the attitudes and practical actions of the person, then it is a reduction of cognitive dissonance. The second level of cognitive dissonance refers to the dissonance between the contents of the message that comes from the mass communication media and the own opinion of the recipients of the messages. Any information in the process of mass communication has the effect of harmonizing or reducing this cognitive dissonance. The analysis of the media practice

shows that if the information coming from the mass media is a function of faster social progress, it is accepted very quickly and cognitive dissonance is reduced.

According to Winifred Schultz, the reality that the media portrays does not match the actual reality, what really happened. He talks about the construction of reality through the media, where the value of the news is a criterion on the basis of which that construction takes place. This constructed world for the recipients, who do not have direct access to more of the reported events, becomes a factual reality, i.e. a "second-hand reality". This is not to argue that media reality equates to reality and that reality could therefore be ignored. But it is also true that, to a large extent, citizens' perception of reality is formed precisely through the selective criteria of a professional group - journalists. (Kunczyk, Zipfel, 1998:138-139)

The informative function of the media opens many debates in the academic and media circles related to the meaning of the information organized in news and its influence in the social reality, that is, the effects upon the audience. It is particularly important to emphasize the issue of the social and human aspect of the new information, its influence in the formation of public opinion and the intensity of increasing the cognitive dimension among certain interest groups. The selection of topics and values and issues surrounding facts determine the dimensions of media influence, and the construction of media reality in daily events contributes to the homogenization of media content. At the same time, the media influence the determination and structure of the topics. The importance of the media is significantly great when creating attitudes about unknown topics, especially if information is repeated about previously unknown issues from social reality, while reducing the pluralism of sources of information or there is an objective impossibility to follow the contents in other media. Ideologically coloured news directly affects the creation of attitudes that mean approaching or moving away from a political option, as well as in the politicization of decisions, phenomena and processes, especially among neutral recipients or among a less educated audience. The instrumentalization of information leads to the manipulation of the public opinion. This implies that media contents are often chosen according to the possibility of their use (instrumental value) in group life. The syndrome of identification and projection with negative news related to the existence, life, personal safety and security of the audience increases the prerequisites for their multiplication in reality and contributes to antisocial phenomena and changes in social psychology and in the realization of certain social roles. In addition to this, objective standards in the creation of media information can also lead to an increase in actual awareness and knowledge without a change in attitude and behavior.

IV. ANALYSIS OF DAILY NEWS BROADCASTS ON NATIONAL TELEVISIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Research focuses on daily news as shown on national television. This is due to the fact that they represent a concentrated form of realization of the informational function of the media where the application of professional standards and criteria and media pluralism can be seen. And on the other hand, the central news broadcasts (TV diaries) have a high rating compared to other programs that are broadcast in prime time. Hence, the analysis in the program week, from a methodological point of view, was carried out on two levels:

- All news articles are analyzed in terms of the following characteristics: measuring the duration of each specific article, determining the thematic affiliation of the contents (areas of social life to which the articles refer) and measuring the temporal representation of different political entities (political parties) and the segments of government).

- In order to compare the way of reporting in different media, two events, two attachments are analyzed in terms of: the vocabulary used in the processing of the event (the use of attributes, emotional expressions, comments, etc.), the presentation of opposing opinions, the presentation of additional facts and information regarding the events, the use of quotations in the reporting, the use of sources (if and how the sources are used, quoting or paraphrasing), the use of recordings (authentic, archival or from other media), the order of the analyzed attachments in the news and the context in which the media reports on the subject (positive, neutral or negative).

The selection criteria for two events are: that the event is of wider social significance and that it appears in the information treatment, if not of all, then at least of the majority of the examined media.

In general, the analyzes of the diaries of the national television programs of the program week in the Republic of Macedonia showed that the Macedonian public is formally offered a high degree of informational pluralism, both in terms of the topics that make up their everyday life, and in terms of the representation of the institutions, the government and the political parties. However, it can be concluded that pluralism, that is, propulsivity for different points of view, is understood by the media more as the transmission of the quantity of information, than the quality of the processing of the information. This is seen through the dominance of the level of awareness, that is, the presentation in relation to the level of analytics, that is, the creation in the news. It can be concluded that there is a greater representation of informative versus analytical genres. Especially with some televisions, the political colour is expressed in the general and individual announcements of the programs. By using attributes, emotional expressions and comments, the informative element of the news receives a positive or negative media context instead of a neutral media context. Even in short

news, by inserting a few words, such as: but... in spite of that...however ..., although..., tries to direct the audience's attention to what the author of the news wants to emphasize, thus influencing the public opinion.

As for the analytical creation in daily news programs, it often comes down to presenting the editorial position that reflects the editorial policy of a specific media house. At the same time, conflicting opinions and additional facts as well as information about the events that will objectively support the comment are not presented.

When informing socio-political events, the media in the Republic of North Macedonia use very imprecise and unclear sources of information, unmarked and illustrative materials without a clear origin, as well as attachments of a conflicting nature in which only one side is consulted. The division of the pro-government and opposition media in the selection of information sources is clear, where the criteria are not the expertise and competence of the person, but mostly the ideological determination and affiliation to a party. Examples of unequal treatment of sources of information in the same media story in terms of time and different approaches in the presentation of data are evident in some private national televisions. For example, in the same journalistic text, one source is quoted or his statement or position is retold, while another source goes with a tonal report, or one interlocutor has more minutes than the other. The case of unsigned texts is also common, especially for topics with insufficiently defined sources and factual data. The analyzes show that the media mostly use the unnamed or generally defined sources for placing unconfirmed information from the domestic scene, but also when informing about the events that are happening outside the Republic of North Macedonia. For example ... from our sources... as he learns..., according to sources from... (Some Ministry or institution)

The analyzes show that news with a negative connotation and permanent criticism of the situation in the society have a striking treatment in the TV diaries, which leads to the creation of a feeling of dissatisfaction, fear, uncertainty and threat from the negative phenomena that multiply in reality. Media negativism encourages factual realism, and its multiplicity depends on the sociological-cultural factors of the environment and the cognitive and experiential dimension of the audience.

V. DISCUSSION

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VI. CONCLUSION

Freedom of speech and expression within the media sphere should always be linked to the responsibility they have regarding the multiplicity of their functions. The theoretical aspects of the information function enable the formation of public opinion which is correlated with the professional standards of the structure and content of the media message. The controversies of objectivity as a basic criterion in conveying information to the audience at the same time include and exclude the truth and honesty of media content as professional standards. Media practice shows that the dominance of media pluralism determines the quantity of information as a way of propulsive topics instead of the quality of the media message. This leads to a reduction in the influence of news creation and the analytical function of the media. The focus on ideologising the news, the ideological-political colouring of the information and above all the emphasis on negativism in the selection of topics leads to the framing of media messages in an agenda setting that it reflects the unification of the shaping of media culture as a product of cultural globalization and re-homogenization of media content that leaves no room for media diversity in the choice of topics and the way content is constructed in the media space. Hence, if in academic circles the question of the arbitrariness of the discourse – media freedom is increasingly problematized, in the era of media pluralism the question of reconsidering the professional standards and criteria of the information function in the media reality arises. Experiential practice shows that it is not enough to assess the

professionalism of information only from the aspect of separating facts from comments, but transforming the duality of news – whatever and how the audience thinks, into a narrative for an informed citizen with an analytical public opinion based on the offered facts and not based on the comments in the media message. It is necessary to restore the essential phraseology in the informative message – No comment –.

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VIII. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest in this work. [Each manuscript needs to include a disclosure of financial interest or other conflict of interest statement. This is where these statements go].

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