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Functioning of The Media in North Macedonia During COVID-19 and Respecting Journalistic Ethics

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Abstract

Ethics is the study of human behavior through the lens of moral principles. It helps us understand what is right or wrong and how we make decisions that affect others. In journalism, ethics form the foundation of professionalism. A journalist's most important asset should be ethical integrity. Yet, today, this principle is often overlooked. We live in an era of rapid and uncontrolled information sharing. Journalists sometimes fail to report even basic facts accurately. In more serious cases, they may violate individuals' rights through careless or sensational reporting. Social media has made this worse. Now, anyone can present themselves as a journalist simply by creating a page and posting content, regardless of training or accountability. This flood of information has created a dangerous imbalance: we have more quantity of news, but less quality. As a result, ethical standards in journalism are weakening. This trend became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when misinformation spread rapidly and caused real harm. To rebuild trust, media professionals must return to core ethical principles: verify information, respect privacy, avoid sensationalism, and prioritize public interest. Media organizations should also develop clearer guidelines and provide training in ethics, especially during times of crisis. These steps are essential to ensure that journalism serves society, not harms it.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, information, media, ethics

Introduction

Ethics is the study of human behavior through the lens of moral principles. It helps us understand what is right or wrong and how we make decisions that affect others. In journalism, ethics form the foundation of professionalism. A journalist's most important asset should be ethical integrity. Yet, today, this principle is often overlooked.

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This flood of information has created a dangerous imbalance: we have more quantity of news, but less quality. As a result, ethical standards in journalism are weakening. This trend became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when misinformation spread rapidly and caused real harm.

To rebuild trust, media professionals must return to core ethical principles: verify information, respect privacy, avoid sensationalism, and prioritize public interest. Media organizations should also develop clearer guidelines and provide training in ethics, especially during times of crisis. These steps are essential to ensure that journalism serves society, not harms it.

Media Functioning During COVID-19

The media has long been one of the first elements in society to be misused during times of crisis and conflict. Often, even before a conflict fully emerges, different groups attempt to take control of media channels to shape narratives in their favor. As it's been said, "Those who don't directly experience a conflict often become part of it because of the media."

In early 2020, during the months of January and February, initial reports of COVID-19 emerged from several countries. The virus quickly escalated into a global threat, reaching over 210 countries. On January 30, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency, urging governments to act swiftly to protect their populations (World Health Organization, 2020).

On February 11, the WHO officially named the disease "COVID-19," in an effort to standardize the terminology and avoid regional stigmatization. Despite this, many world leaders continued to publicly refer to it as the "Chinese Virus," a label that contributed to rising tensions and social division (Rogers et al., 2020).

These narratives had real consequences. Across the world, individuals of Asian descent experienced discrimination and verbal abuse. In one case, a video circulated on social media showed a Macedonian citizen insulting and verbally attacking a group of Asian tourists. Shockingly, he recorded and posted the incident himself. The video sparked widespread condemnation from the public, with many demanding institutional responses to address the racism (Alsat-M, 2020).

In the Republic of North Macedonia, some early news reports on COVID-19 began appearing in January. However, widespread media coverage only intensified after February 26, when Health Minister Venko Filipche announced the first confirmed case in the country. Although preventive measures such as border screenings had already been introduced on February 24, most media outlets focused solely on official statements from the Ministry of Health. It took over two months before journalists were allowed access to hospitals and frontlines where patients were being treated.

This delay prompts an important question: Were the media in North Macedonia prepared to handle a crisis of this scale? The answer seems to reflect a broader systemic issue, not just within the media, but also in the state's institutional readiness. While journalists often lacked access to critical information, this was partly due to governmental restrictions rather than negligence.

Nevertheless, the situation underscores a vital ethical challenge: In times of crisis, the media must go beyond passive reporting and take an active role in seeking the truth, ensuring transparency, and protecting public interest. Relying solely on official narratives can leave the public vulnerable to misinformation, fear, and social division.

To improve media response in future emergencies, several steps are essential. Media outlets should establish crisis-reporting protocols, invest in investigative journalism, and ensure their staff are trained in ethical reporting under pressure. At the same time, governments must recognize the media as a key public ally — not a threat — and facilitate open access to information that can aid in public awareness and safety.

Reporting of the First Cases of COVID-19 in North Macedonia

On February 24, 2020, the national broadcaster Alsat M aired a report titled: "Coronavirus: Authorities Warn of Stronger Controls at All Border Crossings." The piece announced reinforced screening procedures at border points and airports, particularly for passengers arriving from high-risk areas. The alarming developments in Italy had triggered a sense of urgency in North Macedonia.

In an emergency meeting, the Commission for Infectious Diseases decided to set up designated spaces at border crossings, where passengers from high-risk destinations would be questioned by border police. These officers would then coordinate with public health centers.

Health Minister Venko Filipche urged citizens to avoid traveling to affected areas unless absolutely necessary. He also mentioned that more detailed guidance — including possible restrictions on school trips — would follow after a meeting of the Crisis Management Center (Dosja.al, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that, at that point, no Macedonian citizens in Italy had tested positive for the virus. However, around 23,000 Macedonian nationals were living in the affected regions of Lombardy and Veneto. The death toll in Italy had risen to seven, and panic was spreading as roughly 50,000 residents in the north of the country prepared for a weeks-long quarantine. Stores were being emptied, and all sports and cultural events were canceled. In response, countries such as Croatia and Greece canceled all student trips and excursions to Italy.

National Coverage of the First Confirmed Case in North Macedonia – February 26, 2020

Several media outlets reported the country's first confirmed COVID-19 case on February 26, 2020. TV21 published a piece titled: "The First Case of Coronavirus Is Confirmed in Macedonia – Health Institutions Call for Calm!"

The report stated that a 50-year-old woman who had returned from a month-long stay in Italy tested positive. She had proactively presented herself at the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Skopje after experiencing symptoms similar to those reported internationally. She was immediately hospitalized and isolated. According to authorities, she had traveled from Belgrade to Skopje in a van with other passengers who were later contacted for screening.

Minister Venko Filipche addressed the media:

"The patient who arrived at the clinic at around 03:00 has tested positive for COVID-19. She is the first confirmed case in Skopje. Let me repeat what we have been consistently saying: there is no reason to panic" (Portalb.mk, 2020).

Epidemiologist Zharko Karaxhoski, chairman of the Infectious Diseases Commission, emphasized that the case was expected:

"This situation is under control and did not catch us by surprise. We anticipated new cases in Europe. Keep in mind that Italy alone has 14 million residents. We cannot completely stop the movement of people, goods, and capital. According to WHO health regulations, such transfers cannot be fully prohibited."

Officials at the Infectious Diseases Clinic told TV21 that the patient's condition was stable. Despite the confirmed case, interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski stated that borders would remain open and that no bans on public gatherings or holidays would be implemented at that time.

By this point, three other suspected cases had been reported in North Macedonia — individuals who had recently returned from Italy and Dubai — but all tested negative. Meanwhile, neighboring Greece confirmed its first case, Croatia reported two infections, and Italy's confirmed cases rose to 400, with 12 recorded deaths.

TV KLAN Macedonia – The First Case of Coronavirus

On February 26, 2020, TV KLAN Macedonia reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in North Macedonia. A 50-year-old woman had entered the country via the Tabanovce border crossing in the early morning hours, traveling in a van alongside other passengers. Upon arrival, she voluntarily presented herself to the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Skopje, reporting symptoms of illness. Although she had been unwell during her stay in Italy, she had not been tested for COVID-19 while there (Hajro Jajaga, 2020).

The patient was immediately placed in intensive care and isolated from other individuals in the clinic. Health Minister Venko Filipche stated:

"Epidemiologists are currently working to trace her contacts and determine who she traveled with and where those individuals are now. The primary objective is to isolate anyone who may potentially carry the virus, even if they currently show no symptoms. A 14-day

isolation is required in such cases. Since she became ill while still in Italy, we believe her incubation period may have passed during her stay there."

During a press conference, technical Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski addressed concerns about public gatherings, such as carnivals or political events. He emphasized that decisions would be made based on ongoing assessments from the crisis headquarters:

"For now, we see no reason to implement any restrictions. However, the crisis team will remain in continuous session, monitoring the situation and responding accordingly" (Musliu, 2020).

Spasovski repeatedly called for both individual and collective responsibility in preventing the virus's spread. He urged companies with employees recently returned from Italy to allow them to self-isolate for at least 14 days. The same advice was extended to schools and childcare institutions.

While the initial case did not cause widespread panic, two additional infections were confirmed on March 6, this time outside the capital. The patients, who had returned from Italy on February 27, sought medical assistance in the city of Dibra on March 2.

Media Challenges and the Ethics of Information

The early days of COVID-19 coverage in North Macedonia revealed significant weaknesses in media communication. Notably, the quality and clarity of public information declined as reporting became more fragmented and influenced by ethnic and political narratives. The subjectivity of certain reports compromised the neutrality expected in times of crisis.

This raises critical questions about media ethics, particularly the responsibility to provide verified, unbiased information that serves the public good. As the pandemic unfolded, the role of the press became even more vital — not only in informing the population but also in avoiding unnecessary fear, misinformation, or discrimination.

SHENJA TV – North Macedonia Confirms First Case of Coronavirus

North Macedonia officially recorded its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020. Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, announced that the patient was a 50-year-old woman who had recently returned from Italy, entering the country by bus through the Tabanovce border crossing. According to Filipche, she had already passed the incubation period and had been sick for two weeks while in Italy. She had not been

tested there but was directed to the Infectious Diseases Clinic upon arrival in Skopje, where she was immediately isolated and placed under appropriate care.

"The patient has been placed in the isolation unit at the Infectious Diseases Clinic. Epidemiological analysis shows that she stayed in Italy for about a month and had already been ill there. Since she received treatment while abroad and has shown no new symptoms since entering the country, we believe she no longer poses a risk of spreading the virus," said Minister Filipche.

He also emphasized that all individuals who may have come into contact with the patient would be tested and monitored, with updates to follow.

Technical Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski assured the public that the case was being handled in full accordance with established protocols and that all necessary services were prepared to respond effectively.

"The situation is under control. All state institutions are equipped with personnel and resources, and they are adhering to safety standards and protocols. There is no cause for panic. Citizens should continue to follow the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health," said Spasovski.

Dr. Zharko Karaxhovski added that the patient was conscious and under constant medical supervision. He emphasized that she had no contact with other individuals upon entering the clinic, reducing any potential risk of transmission.

Further details regarding the patient and public health response were expected in Minister Filipche's scheduled press conference later that evening at 8:00 p.m.

Media Ethics Under Fire: The Tetovo Tragedy

While the early management of the first COVID-19 case demonstrated professionalism and caution, a tragic incident in Tetovo on September 8, 2021, revealed critical flaws in media ethics. That day, a devastating fire broke out at the modular COVID hospital, resulting in the deaths of 14 patients and family members.

Instead of handling the tragedy with sensitivity, several media outlets published graphic images of the victims and the remains of the hospital. These visuals, shared without proper consideration for the victims' dignity or their families, sparked widespread public outrage.

Footage showed panicked relatives running amidst chaos, while unethical digital platforms prioritized clicks over compassion, circulating disturbing images that

breached all journalistic standards. This behavior stood in stark contrast to traditional media — television, print, and radio — which largely maintained ethical boundaries in their reporting.

Survey on Media Ethics During COVID-19

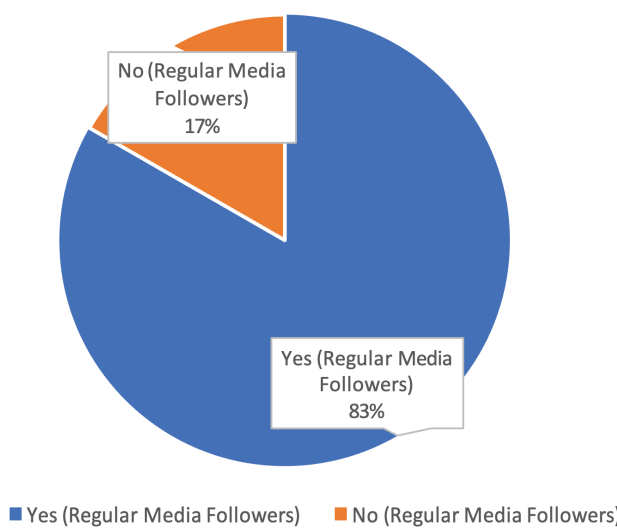
In order to assess the performance of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly regarding their ethical standards in both news reporting and other public broadcasts—we conducted a survey using an electronic form. The goal was to determine how the public perceived the media's ethical responsibility during this critical time.

The survey was completed by 300 citizens of various age groups, offering diverse perspectives. The results are summarized as follows:

Media Consumption Habits

Respondents were first asked whether they regularly follow media—whether written or electronic. 83.3% stated that they are regular media followers. 16.7% indicated they do not follow the media frequently. This shows a high level of media engagement among the surveyed population.

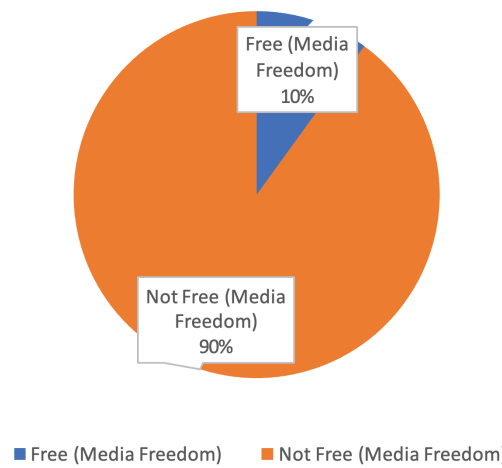
Figure 1: Regular Media Followers Survey Result



Perception of Media Freedom

To understand public opinion on media freedom in addressing social, economic, or political issues, respondents were asked how freely they think the media operates in North Macedonia. 90% believed that the media lack transparency and do not operate freely. Only 10% felt that the press enjoys freedom of expression. This points to a significant level of public distrust in the media's independence and transparency.

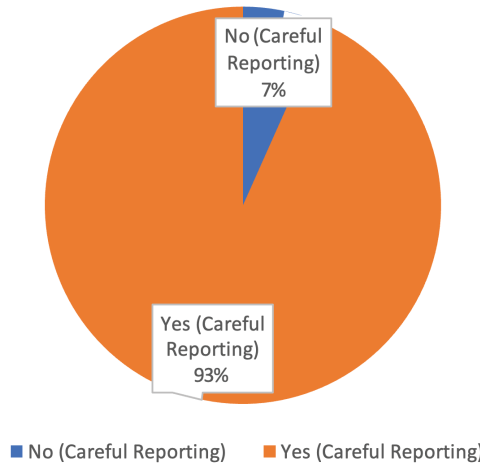
Figure 2: Perception of Media Freedom



Ethics in Reporting Sensitive Issues

Respondents were asked whether journalists should exercise greater caution when reporting on sensitive topics like COVID-19. 93.3% agreed that journalists should be more careful when reporting sensitive issues. Only 6.7% believed that such caution is unnecessary. The overwhelming majority demands more responsibility in media coverage during crises.

Figure 3: Should Journalists be More Careful Reporting Sensitive



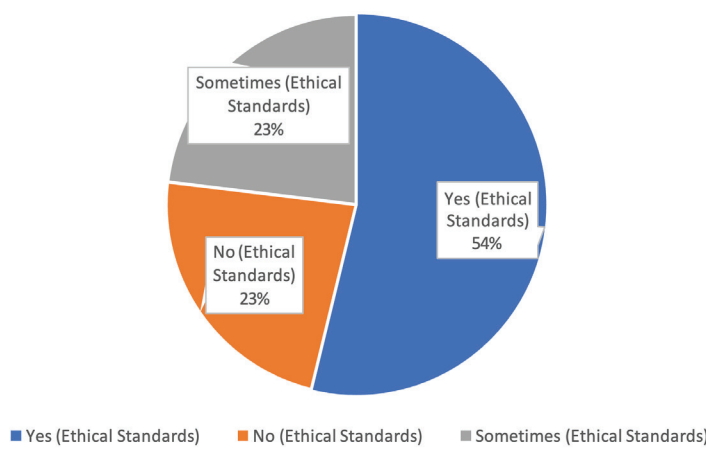
Ethical Standards on Social Media

In the final question, respondents were asked if news content on social media should be held to higher ethical standards. They had three answer options:

- 53,8% answered Yes
- 23,1% answered No
- 23,1% answered Sometimes

(Note: Some respondents selected more than one option, indicating mixed views.)

Figure 4: Should Social Media News Contain More Ethical Standards?



While a strong majority supports the need for ethical improvement, a portion of the audience remains uncertain or unconvinced, highlighting the complexity of public attitudes toward digital media.

The survey results reflect a clear public expectation for more ethical, transparent, and responsible journalism, particularly during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Key takeaways include:

- A demand for better media freedom and transparency.
- A widespread call for ethical sensitivity when reporting health-related news.
- A need for stricter ethical standards on social media platforms, where misinformation often spreads unchecked.
- News organizations and social media platforms should implement stricter editorial guidelines, fact-checking procedures, and ethical codes—especially when covering topics that impact public health, safety, and trust.

Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, media ethics go beyond just professional standards—they also reflect moral responsibility. Consider a situation where a journalist witnesses an accident and an injured person needs help. The journalist must decide whether to act based on their professional duty or their moral obligation. The key question is: should saving a life take priority, or is reporting public information more important?

Journalists must rely on ethical codes to make these decisions. These codes prioritize the public interest over personal interests, helping journalists avoid mistakes and stay focused on their role to inform responsibly.

The media earns public trust by being a platform of truth. Today, much of the truth is uncovered not by journalists, but by the public itself. As the "fourth estate," the media has a duty to maintain high standards of accuracy and accountability.

In reporting on sensitive events, such as the fires in Tetovo and Bulgaria, media outlets must be careful. Ethical guidelines were violated when graphic images of victims were published. This is unacceptable and must not happen again in the future.

Suggestions for Media Ethics in Crisis Situations

Publishing distressing images that violate the dignity of victims and their families should be avoided. In times of crisis, media should prioritize accurate, well-sourced information over sensational stories. Journalists should remember that behind every story, there are real people. Ethical considerations should guide how sensitive topics are reported.

By following these guidelines, the media can ensure that it upholds its critical role in society—providing trustworthy, ethical journalism that serves the public's best interests.

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