



The Civil Society Facility, Media Freedom and Accountability Programme,
EuropeAid/134613/C/ACT/MULTI

WHOSE MEDIA ARE THESE?



This project is funded by
The European Union



A project implemented by
The Center for Independent Journalism

South-East European Partnership for Media Development

SEE Partnership for Media Development is implemented by a consortium of media organizations from **Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania**. Media professionals from Kosovo and Turkey will also be involved.

The Project is co-financed by the European Commission, the Civil Society Facility, Media Freedom and Accountability Programme, Europe Aid/134613/C/ACT/MULTI

The SEENPM members that are part of the project: Albanian Media Institute (Albania), Mediacenter for Media and Civil Society Development (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Media Initiatives – Association for Media Development and Promotion of Professional Journalism (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Macedonian Institute for Media (FYROM), Montenegro Media Institute (Montenegro), Media Center (Serbia), Media and Reform Centre Nis (Serbia), Media Development Center (Bulgaria).

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By the Center for Independent
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This project is funded
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Macedonian Intitute for Media

SKOPJE, September 2017

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INTRODUCTION

As recent developments with digital news show, the quantity of information is inversely proportional to its quality.

The abundance of information which became apparent with the fast digital development, viewed from Macedonian point of view has not led to better democracy, as it was common to think when digital media appeared, but towards total control and distortion of the news agenda. Especially after the recent developments with fake news, and do not forget the vast majority of so called fake news sites for the controversial Trump presidential campaign originated from Veles, a town in central FYROMacedonia¹.

Digital media transformed the audience into author and curator of content, minimizing the role of the legacy media, editors and journalists in creating the public news agenda. This helped some independent media get the reach they deserved, but enabled various ways of control and distortion of the public discourse, and due to the fast development of the digital platforms created various ethical and legal problems.

In young democracies, such as Macedonia, these problems are more obvious and have more devastating consequences than in societies where democratic tradition, ethical standards and check and balance systems are stronger and play the role of gatekeepers that keep misinformation at bay.

MEDIA NOT-FREEDOM

The state of media freedom in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the last 8 years has deteriorated rapidly. From 34-th place in the world in 2009 we found ourselves on the 123 place in the 2014 ranking of the Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders. At present FYROM is ranked 118².

Blurry media legislation that came into power in the recent years added fuel to media devastation. The lack of updated media legislation³ that was present at the beginning of the decade turned into overregulation, with totally ignoring the existence of online media.

The new Law on Civil Liability for Defamation, for example, provides special treatment for journalists and media and sets limits to the amounts of compensations/fines that they may be ordered to pay. Even with such limits, which are set at amounts that are rather insignificant for Western standards (2000 euro for the journalist, up to 10.000 for the editor, and up to 15.000 euro for the publisher/owner) that do not differ between small and big media, between influential and marginal, for some independent media can be fatal.

Defamation was removed from the criminal code in 2012 but prosecutions have been replaced by civil actions with the possibility of heavy fines for reporters and media owners. At least 580 defamation suits have been brought since the end of 2014, several dozen of them against journalists. As a result, more than half of Macedonia's journalists say they censor themselves⁴.

The new Macedonian media legislation has created another issue: media owners are subject to fines in case of defamation suits. By posing the biggest fines on the owners, the law automatically encourages owners to intervene into editorial policy of their media, since huge possible fine for them automatically places them responsible for the content.

According to Freedom House, Macedonian media is "not free" since its media landscape is deeply polarized along political lines; the same opinion is shared by the 2016 IREX Media Sustainability Report, which states that: The prolonged political crisis has fortified the existing divisions in Macedonia's media sector, primarily along political lines, into pro-government and critical/independent/pro-opposition media.

1 BuzzFeed: How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.rakjRWGXrL#.iuP471AN0o accessed March 2017

2 2016 World Press Freedom Index <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> accessed March 2017

3 Digital Media Mapping Macedonia, 2012 <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/mapping-digital-media-macedonia>

4 Reporters without Borders Macedonia report <https://rsf.org/en/macedonia> accessed March 2017

Self-censorship among journalists is common, due primarily to pressure from media owners with particular business or political interests and, and more recently, concerns about surveillance. Journalists are poorly paid and face threats and harassment for engaging in investigative or critical reporting⁵.

MAINSTREAM MEDIA ASTRAY

Wired recordings released by the opposition in 2015 appeared to reveal conversations between high-level government officials and the editorial staff of major television station indicating that the government was directly influencing editorial policies.

Media integrity is under constant attacks by influential business and political elites, especially from those being in constant power in the last 10 years. The role of the editors is minimized, following the huge harvest of editors in the last years. More than 50 editors of major media outlets were changed recently.⁶ There is almost no mainstream media that is still run by the same editor from 5 years ago.

A comparison between the role and the integrity of the editors “then and now”, inevitably leads to the distorted image of editors that prevails nowadays. It stems from the absolutely forgotten role of the media as a promoter and protector of the public interest⁷.

The new editors are usually young or previously unknown to the media professionals, and their role is primarily to maintain a channel of communication from the political elite to the audience (voters) rather than to inform the public truthfully and independently.

MEDIA OWNERS AS LEVERS OF NEWS CONTROL

Media ownership is a problem in Macedonia, especially in case of the online media.

The majority of most influential print and broadcast media outlets are part of bigger corporations with diverse portfolios, for which broadcasting or publishing is not the core business. That situation has detrimental effect on the editorial independence of their media, which are used primarily in support of their main businesses.

Panelists who participated in the 2016 Media sustainability index in FYROM commented that “the government skillfully uses that situation through the distribution of public tenders and deals for public works, to basically buy the services of the media owned by big corporations”⁸.

The analysis of the media policy development and implementation in the country evidently shows that the last two and a half decades have seen retrograde processes in terms of freedom of expression and media independence. Although during the first decade and a half the concept of public interest was widely articulated in the regulation and the media sphere was far more plural and liberal, this initial period was nevertheless marked by the influence of the strong media moguls protecting journalists and the media only when their interests were at stake. The salient feature of the second period of the media system development is a gradual conquest of the entire media space by the ruling party. Using the powerful mechanisms of the state apparatus, the party in power put under its own umbrella all business moguls, especially the ones in possession of influential media outlets. Ever since its establishment, the regulatory authority had been the target of attempts at political influence, but after 2006 resistance to such influence completely broke. Finally, all that had a disastrous effect on the media independence and the journalism profession⁹.

5 Macedonia: Freedom of the Press 2016 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/macedonia> accessed March 2017

6 META: Rich journalistic and editorial harvest: How did freedom fall? <http://meta.mk/en/bogata-novinarska-i-urednichka-zhetva-kako-pagashe-slobodata/> accessed March 2017

7 Editors in Macedonia: Under threat and political pressure <http://mediaobservatory.net/radar/editors-macedonia-under-threat-and-political-pressure> accessed March 2017

8 IREX: Macedonia Media Sustainability Index 2016 <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2016-macedonia.pdf>

9 Media integrity matters “SEE Media Observatory http://mediaobservatory.net/sites/default/files/media%20integrity%20matters_za%20web_1.pdf

THE RISK IN NUMBERS

In the 19th century it can be said that the media was paid by the audience, since everybody who wanted access to a newspaper had to pay for it, and thus he financed journalists to find and reveal useful information for him. In the same time, by asking questions, journalism was comfortable in its role of a watchdog of the authorities in the name of the audience.

In 20th century advertising became more important and media was not so dependent on direct audience's money, since a large portion of the media finances came from adverts, but still the media held to their role of watchdogs. They were "selling" the trust audience had in them to the advertisers.

Now, since there is abundance of free information the professional media with their expensive apparatus found themselves in crisis, globally. In FYROM this crisis is even more significant, since the market is small and there is a huge number of media outlets, which fragments the market and makes media small and weak to financial and political pressures.

The media scene is oversaturated with hundreds of media outlets - there are over 130 broadcast media alone. There are also half a dozen dailies, a handful of weekly newspapers, and more than 100 online news sites for a population of 2 million people.

The abundance of media outlets does not necessarily mean a great diversity of news reporting. On the contrary, media - mostly pro-governmental and especially during the ongoing political crisis - often carry absolutely identical reports, so that suspicions abound that much of their political coverage is written in one center and then distributed for publication. In addition to oversaturation, the media scene is deeply divided along political lines, usually presenting just one side of the story. In order to gain the full picture of an event, or gather the positions one is forced to consult several news sources from both sides of the political divide, and across several sources.

There are several broadcasters that originally broadcast in Albanian, but also produce bilingual programming and news that are more objective and impartial, because they are both caught in the political battle that is fought mainly by Macedonian political parties.

Macedonian media market is essentially unsustainable. Nobody measures the size of the advertising market systematically, but according to industry insiders, all these media outlets fight for a total available advertising estimated between \$22 and approximately \$40 million. Estimates of government advertising vary from a quarter to a third of the total available advertising revenue, which exerts pressure on the media to adopt pro-government editorial policies.

Television still attracts the over 60 percent of the total available advertising, with rapid growth of digital advertising, which is now assessed to account for about 10 percent of the total advertising market.

In June 2015, during the negotiations mediated by the international community on the necessary reforms in the media sector, the government announced a moratorium on all government advertising, but the moratorium does not include public enterprises and other public institutions with significant promotional budgets, or the municipal administrations. It mostly directs its advertising and promotion budgets towards friendly media, buying their loyalty and favourable editorial policies.

Print media is in constant rapid decline. The biggest print publisher Media Print Macedonia is in huge crisis which could result in total collapse, leaving hundreds of journalists jobless. That - besides being a huge social drama - could affect the workforce market producing inflation of workforce, which could make the already extremely low salaries of the journalists even lower.

News portals and social networks step in to fill the gap. The audience is hungry for information on the complicated political crisis, which has been developing since December 2012, when, on the so called Black Monday, the opposition MPs and journalists were forcefully thrown out of the Parliament; the protests exploded in 2015 and, despite the Przino agreement¹⁰, have continued. Now, more than ever, things are moving into a dangerous direction interfering with ethnical tensions, besides the political ones¹¹.

10 Przino Political Agreement http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/2016-07-20_agreement_en.htm, accessed March 2017

11 Erwan Fouere: Gruevski's Party has Left Macedonia in Limbo <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/gruevski-s-party-has-left-macedonia-in-limbo-03-20-2017>

The explosion of online media - emerging in the market thanks to an inexpensive platform that begun a decade ago - has slowed down. Hence, the most visited news aggregator still aggregates news from 120+ online media (including websites of broadcasters and newspapers), only in the Macedonian language. More than 40 Albanian language online media are also available on its Albanian edition.

Since the online advertising market share is still insignificant, one cannot help wondering how these media outlets are financed and whether they are really media or just copy/paste platforms for content generated from a unique source.

TV RULES, DIGITAL MEDIA FOLLOW

The surveys show that television is still the most influential media in terms of news consumption (90 %), but the Internet as a news distribution channel is on rapid rise (from 19 % in December 2014 to 37 % in April 2016).

Friends and family are considered a primary source of information by a large percentage of the audience. This number is also on the rise from 15 % in 2014 to 30% in 2016, according to IRI survey¹². Social networks as a communication tool must also be taken into account.

That is important especially when it comes to the age of the users: youth turn to the Internet for information, while older people prefer the television.

According to the Survey of the 2014 Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services, 91,8% of the audience aged 16 - 19, and 80% of the adults aged 20-29 use social networks on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the audience aged 16 - 49 watch TV for 2 to 4 hours daily, while adults over 50 watch TV more than 4 hours daily¹³.

In the first quarter of 2016, 72% of people aged 16 - 74 accessed the Internet, 61 % of them on a daily basis. Four out of ten used mobile Internet on smartphone devices; when it comes to youth aged 15-24, the figure exceeds 90%¹⁴.

According to MARNet (Macedonian Domain Register) there are more than 26 thousand registered domains in Macedonia¹⁵.

There is no specific survey on the use of the social networks as a source of information but conclusions can be drawn based on other surveys and reports, which show a rise, especially in terms of mobile platforms.

It is to be noted that social networks must be perceived as a channel, not as a subject in the public communication¹⁶. Therefore they cannot be a source of information, but only a platform and channel for the distribution of the content produced both by users, and the media.

ONLINE MEDIA: OUTLETS AS OUTLAWS

Online media are exempted from the Media Law, including the obligations regarding transparency. As a result, some prominent online news-sites are owned by shell companies registered in known off shore tax havens, with suspicions that the actual owners are Macedonian citizens, including some prominent political figures and holders of public offices.

Increasingly, there are concerns over the proliferation of online media that create havoc in the market, with various voices proposing that they, too, should enter some form of registration process.

Online journalists may find themselves at greater risk because online media are not explicitly mentioned in the definition of media as stipulated by the Media Law. Sadly this has prompted some judges to deny them the protection that the defamation law provides for journalists and media, for instance, as far as the limit of the fines is concerned.

Online media is in a state of Eldorado. It is hard for a regular visitor to determine what is true, what is not¹⁷. This status is widely used by political options to create and publish completely false news, which later on are endlessly quoted by other similar media

12 2016 Survey of public opinion in Macedonia by International Republican Institute http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_macedonia_survey_april_2016_0.pdf accessed March 2017

13 Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services audience poll (MK) http://www.avmu.mk/images/Istrazvanje_na_mislenjeto_na_publikata_za_radio_i_TV_programite_2014_godina.pdf accessed March 2017

14 Usage of information and communication technologies in households - State statistical office <http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2016/8.1.16.30.pdf> accessed March 2017

15 <http://marnet.mk/domeni/operacii-so-domeni/statistika/> accessed March 2017

16 Interview with Emilija Petreska Kamenjarova Communication expert from Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services

17 Balkan Insight: Macedonia Ruling Party Smears Rivals Using Fake News Sites <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/fake-news-sites-used-in-macedonia-campaign-11-25-2016>

close to the same political option until the real source is hard, or even impossible to locate. Considering that digital media literacy is low, especially among the elderly population, the options for manipulation are endless.

There is a huge number of such partisan, extremely biased media outlets, sometimes not because they want it, but because they have no choice as there is little financial independence. They chose sides, in order to survive the battle they are caught in. Some of these media are used to publicly slam politicians and activists, but the court practice is that the online media in FYROM cannot be sued, especially if the owner is unknown, because they are not considered media under the current Media Law.

ALGORITHMS REPLACE MEDIA AND EDITORS

A significant percentage of the audience trusts and consumes only one media outlet, but a large percentage of the surveyed say that they check the information from several sources because they do not trust the media.

Macedonian online media sphere has one very important characteristic, which is not so common elsewhere: News aggregators, especially the most visited Time.mk, are the default landing page for news consumption. Time.mk publishes their Google Analytics reports on their website¹⁸ and they show numbers of 7 million visits, almost 18 million pageviews by 600.000 unique visitors monthly, which make it by far the most visited news platform in the country.

This fact helps audience to compare various news sources, but in the same time, it distorts the news agenda by using algorithms to position the content without a human reasoning behind. Algorithms usually rank better the news clusters that have more sources or keywords on the same subject. Thus the more media cover an event, the more important this topic appears. That can be misused for propaganda purposes since the clusters of media that are close to some center, for example to a political party, or simply copy paste the same content among them, appear more influential.

The Time.mk aggregator, as Google news, has algorithms to tackle such attempts, but they, as human intervention is not present, sometimes can be avoided.

There is the possibility of creating aggregators from powerful political and economic groups with the sole intention of distorting the news agenda, since the algorithm can be tweaked in favor of certain media. Few were made, but they did not come close to Time.mk figures.

Facebook is a specific social aggregator, as well.

CAUGHT IN THE SOCIAL “NETS”

Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Macedonia. At the present there are more than 1,000,000 Facebook users¹⁹.

Though significantly smaller, Twitter preserves its specificity: it is very active and socially and politically engaged. In the last several months after the elections on December 11, 2016, it is to be noted that this platform gained many new users, while the old ones suddenly became very active²⁰. A quick analysis shows that many users defend the political option in power since 2006, especially the nationalist political party VMRO-DPMNE. This shows an organized attempt to flood the social networks with support for this political option.

Hence, only 2.5 percent of the Macedonians say that they have published their opinions on political or citizen aspects on social networks, which is very small for a real e-democracy.

As for the foreign diplomats²¹, politicians use Facebook and Twitter to publish and promote attitudes more frequently.

Special Prosecutors Office uses Facebook to announce their press conferences, also. Noteworthy, that this is a one-way communication. Local politicians rarely engage in discussions with the other users. On the other hand with every political option having hundreds of trolls it is almost impossible to have a decent debate.

18 Time.mk Aggregator visits overview <http://www.time.mk/info/marketing>

19 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm> accessed March 2017

20 Interview with Darko Buldioski, Digital Media Consultant

21 British ambassador Charles Garret blog: Five Thoughts on Diplomatic Tweeting in Macedonia <https://blogs.fco.gov.uk/fcoeditorial/2017/02/06/five-thoughts-on-diplomatic-tweeting-in-macedonia/>

Trolls have been especially active on the timelines of foreign diplomats and ambassadors, in the last few months. They became increasingly active after former Prime minister and president of VMRO-DPMNE addressed the protesters in front of the State Electoral Commission in December 2016, saying that his party would not tolerate foreign interference into Macedonian internal matters. After that, controversial fake obituaries of foreign ambassadors and diplomats appeared on the social networks.²² VMRO DPMNE, the ruling party at the time, condemned the incident²³, but its supporters continued the smear campaign against foreign diplomats, especially on social networks.

Hate speech is becoming more common on social networks as nationalistic rhetoric is used more actively, fueled by the partisan media²⁴.

Recently more intense organized activity is evident on Social networks (Facebook and Twitter) similar to what Fuchs²⁵ addresses as “colonization of the social networks”.

Imagine that a Facebook group is created from a political party; imagine that all the supporters receive a message to join; imagine that the group gains more than 20.000 followers in one day; imagine a link with fake news is shared to the group; imagine that all the group members share the same link on their timelines; imagine the vast majority gives a like to the same link the other members shared... add a little ad campaign and mix it with some fake profiles...

This confuses the regular Facebook user – moreover, this confuses the Facebook algorithms, which by default promote viral content.

Suddenly, something becomes newsworthy just because everybody is talking about it. It is not news, it is a construct, and it is the fake news dissemination concept in its essence. Imagine there are many such Facebook groups.

It is possible, and it is probably happening. Here, now in Macedonia.

It is very hard to tackle such massive actions. These actions are not illegal, they are unethical. Fighting that should not be unethical, that is why it is hard. Solution?

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY AND MEDIA INTEGRITY

The popular subject of the Fake news did one good thing. It raised the awareness of the audience that not everything they receive as information on digital platforms is true.

Media literacy should become an important part of the educational cycle, as well as a public awareness campaign. Media as most concerned party should play their role raising audience awareness, because their task is not only to inform and entertain, but to educate.

Now more than ever the media integrity is becoming important. Audience seeks entities they can trust, a media outlet that they can believe without performing fact-checking.

This is a great chance for the real and professional media. They just have to survive the crisis without making compromises with the truth. And that obviously is the hardest thing.

22 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/01/osceodihr-post-election-period-in-macedonia-was-tense-and-full-of-harsh-rhetoric/> accessed March 2017

23 Meta: VMRO-DPMNE is condemning the publishing of posthumous photographs of foreign ambassadors in Macedonia on the Internet <http://meta.mk/en/vmro-dpmne-is-condemning-the-publishing-of-posthumous-photographs-of-foreign-ambassadors-in-macedonia-on-the-internet/> accessed March 2017

24 Balkan Insight: Pro-Govt Media Inflamm Nationalist Hysteria in Macedonia <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-propaganda-war-spreads-nationalist-hysteria-03-15-2017> accessed March 2017

25 <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/552>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The current report is part of a series of similar works produced from February to April 2017.

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On behalf of the Center for Independent Journalism in Bucharest, we would like to thank the following partners for their support and cooperation:

Albanian Media Institute (Albania), Mediacenter for Media and Civil Society Development - (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Media Initiatives – Association for Media Development and Promotion of Professional Journalism (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Macedonian Institute for Media (FYROM), Montenegro Media Institute (Montenegro), Media Center (Serbia), Media and Reform Centre Nis (Serbia), Media Development Center (Bulgaria).

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