

# THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PRESS AND MEDIA COUNCILS IN TIME OF **COVID-19**



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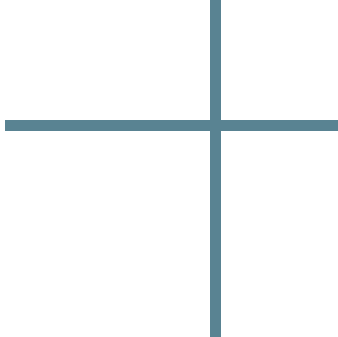
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The coronavirus crisis plaguing the world since the beginning of 2020 has transformed the way journalists and media function, their working conditions, and safety, and left profound impacts on the economic status of media professionals and organizations, as well as overall access to information [1].

Following the spread of the virus, states and governments have, justifiably and necessarily, taken various restrictive measures to protect public health in times of crisis. Their response needed to be proportionate to the demands of the situation in areas of human rights and the rule of law, as two cornerstone values of democratic governance [2]. However, in the past months, media freedom advocates have expressed concern that some governments are using the crisis as a pretext to introduce disproportionate restrictions on press freedom [3].

Some countries have used the coronavirus outbreak as an opportunity to entrench repressive measures on freedom of expression and information, limits on public participation, or increased surveillance [4]. In such a confusing and tense atmosphere, journalists across the world have also faced growing verbal and physical attacks, censorship, and difficult access to information and locations.

These threats to media freedom come at a time when access to verified information has become critically important to save lives and help people debunking the disinformation circulating on the virus. "Professional journalism – publishing verified facts and informed opinion – has given people an alternative to disinformation and has helped to disprove the falsehoods. Operating in the glare of the public square, it contrasts with the hidden and hard-to-challenge content that is shared in private messaging services" [5].

To ensure that citizens trust the information they receive from media, ethics and accountability mechanisms play a critical role. Such mechanisms have been developed in many countries across the world to define the professional standards of the profession, guide journalists, and at the same time, supervise their abidance to these standards. This is why Guy Berger, Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO, reminds that "press councils are crucial in raising standards in the profession, defending it, and convincing the public that it has the ability to respond" [6].



Since the start of the pandemic of Covid-19, self-regulatory bodies across the world have intensified their work to respond to the new waves of disinformation and the need for additional guidance and support to the media community in covering the crisis.

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), during the Covid-19 pandemic and thereby highlight their critical role in helping journalists navigate this crisis. Documents, guidelines, recommendations, and mechanisms of international organizations and associations working in the field of media were reviewed, and interviews were 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.

# 1. PROVIDING SPECIFIC GUIDANCE TO MEDIA ON THE ETHICAL COVERAGE OF THE PANDEMIC

As soon as the pandemic of Covid-19 started spreading and the demand of citizens to access reliable information about the crisis increased, press and media councils have reacted by reminding journalists and media across their countries about their codes of ethics. The Council of Media Ethics in North Macedonia immediately issued recommendations to the media at the beginning of the crisis to report professionally and avoid sensationalism: "Media should carefully assess information containing estimates of a possible escalation of events" [7].

In Belgium, the National Security Center asked the Press Council for the German and French-speaking media (CDJ) for information about the ethical standards that apply to journalists in times of crisis. They were referred to the Belgium Code of Ethics [8] and the Specific Guidelines for Reporting During Emergencies [9]. Specific discussions were then organized between the National Security Center and the Association of Professional Journalists to remind media professionals and authorities of the standards for media coverage of health issues and their adjustment to the practice, without restricting media freedom.

In addition, and when necessary, press and media councils have issued additional guidelines for journalists covering a pandemic. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia and the Council of Media Ethics in North Macedonia published the brochure "Guidelines for safe and professional reporting on coronavirus" [10]. Among the specific recommendations provided to journalists were to:

- Consult official sources of information, such as the WHO website, when searching for information related to the coronavirus;
- Check their use of terminology;
- Avoid social discrimination and stigmatization.

During that period, the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina received numerous press inquiries on how to report on the coronavirus pandemic, and issued several statements in which it pointed out to journalists and editors that in such situations, it is extremely important to respect the Press Code and online media of BiH, and adhere to ethical reporting [11]. Notably:

- Take care of accurate, timely, verified information;
- Use only reliable and relevant sources;
- Do not stigmatize the infected;
- Pay attention to personal data protection;
- Repeatedly remind the public of what can save their lives;
- Follow the recommendations of the World Health Organization and relevant medical experts;
- Do not give space to 'fake' experts.

Press and media councils have helped disseminate some additional guidance produced by international organisations, such as:

- UNESCO Resource Center providing examples of good practices, priorities, advice and technical assistance, as well as support for mutual cooperation [12];
- Safety guidelines from the Committee to Protect Journalists which also includes advices for psychological stability, protection of their own health and the health of others, protection and cleaning of equipment from contamination, as well as on preparation of their own medical protective equipment and digital security [13];
- BBC Media Action shared ten tips for the media during the ongoing 'infodemic' related to building contacts with health professionals and other important collaborators and public authorities [14];
- Internews offered a range of practical tips for journalists working at home, given that many media workers are forced to shift to remote work, through the intensive use of digital technologies. 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 it provides links to availability of training [15].

## 2. DEFENDING MEDIA FREEDOM AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION DURING PANDEMIC

"Press councils must adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic 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." (Kolareto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, Interview conducted on 12.08.2020.)

### a. Press freedom

As various reports show increased threats to press freedom in connection with the pandemic (disproportionate laws to counter disinformation, denials of the right to access information, enhanced surveillance of journalists, etc.), a number of press and media councils have been active in reacting to these threats, notably by publishing press releases and issuing public reactions.

The Albanian Media Council, for instance, explained: "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." (Kolareto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, Interview conducted on 12.08.2020.)

In North Macedonia, the Council of Media Ethics, both individually and in partnership with the Association of Journalists and the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers, has repeatedly reacted to the attempts to put pressure on journalists in the exercise of their professional activities.

In Germany, the Press Council, together with journalists' associations and newspaper associations, issued a statement warning that restrictions must not jeopardize freedom of expression. "People need reliable information, and journalists must be able to meet this demand." [16]

## b. Access to information

"Even if our mission as a press council 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." [17]

Considering the critical importance for journalists to access information about the pandemic, many press and media councils have been vocal and active requesting respect for that right. In Norway, for instance, media organizations and the press council pressured the authorities to publish more information amid health institutions and the police resisting to provide the necessary information to the media. "Some hospitals did not even give information to journalists on how many people were hospitalized with Covid-19. This makes it difficult for the media to inform the public." [18] Similarly, the Finnish Press Council, which 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, highlighted: "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." (Eero Hyvonen, Press Council in Finland, Interview conducted on 27.08.2020.)

The limited access of journalists to information about the pandemic and the fact that the role of informing was taken over by the Government, which published information and figures about the pandemic on social networks, forced the Press Council in Albania to react strongly. "We had to react publicly and demand that the Government be more open and provide access to journalists and newsrooms. They did not respond to our request, and it looked like they wanted to protect themselves by not disclosing details on the way they handled the situation." [19]



Due to the crisis, press conferences often began to be organized online, placing certain restrictions on journalists and media workers' access to information. "Journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina 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." [20] With the easing of health measures, journalists 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." [21] The Press Council appealed to the authorities to stop with the practices of informal briefings and asked for a serious attitude towards the process of informing by all actors in charge of communication, without improvisations and without speculations.



### **3. HANDLING COMPLAINTS ABOUT POTENTIAL BREACHES OF THE CODE OF ETHICS DURING THE COVERAGE OF THE PANDEMIC**

The media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked mixed reactions from the public. The number of complaints received by press and media councils about potential breaches of the code of journalistic ethics during the pandemic indeed varies very much from one country to another. One cannot say that overall there has been an increase in the number of complaints received by self-regulatory mechanisms. Yet, it is possible to highlight the main types of potential breaches reported by citizens and to report on the main violations of the codes of ethics according to the adjudications of press and media councils.

Overall, citizens mainly complained on media exaggerating or neglecting problems and often criticized the irresponsibility of journalists and media workers (for not wearing masks and ignoring physical distance), although not covered by the codes of ethics. Press councils have also received a number of complaints highlighting conspiracy theories, which proves an overall issue with conspiracy theories in our societies: "The coronavirus is a project, it is not incurable, we have a 'cure!'" or "The virus was patented in 2015!" [22]

#### **a. Publication of false or 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 has been the number one reason for complaints of citizens to press councils.

For instance, 46% of the cases reported to the Council of Media Ethics of North Macedonia in the period February - July 2020 have been in relation to a potential violation of Article 1 of the Code of Journalists of Macedonia, which refers to the publication of accurate and verified information [23].

The most frequent complaints received by the Press Council in Finland during the crisis were related to allegations that the media failed to correct an essential error, while in Estonia, the Press council had to review several cases of media contents in which no distinction was allegedly made between news, opinions, and speculations.

In this context, the need to adhere to the basic standards for professional and ethical journalistic reporting on the pandemic has been constantly emphasized. Press and media councils kept reminding that journalism plays a key role in providing credible, balanced, and reliable information in tackling myths and speculation.

Contrary to the other press councils, the Albanian body did not receive citizens' complaints about the circulation of false information. According to the staff of this press council: "This is due to the fact that the information was completely centralized by the Government. There were numbers, but no one knew if they were correct or not." (Koloreto Cukali, Press Council in Albania, Interview conducted on 12.08.2020)



## **b. Sensationalist media reporting**

Among the most frequent complaints received by press and media councils after the publication of false information are the sensationalist approach of some media to dealing with pandemic-related topics. Complaints referred to the vocabulary used in the reporting, as well as to the approach in dealing with the issue.

Violation of article 8 from the Code of Journalists of North Macedonia, which refers to sensational reporting, was 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 Ethics (referring to information that may lead to unfounded hopes or fears among readers) were frequently reported to the Press Council in Germany during the crisis. "Some headlines have suggested that a cure for Covid-19 may have been found and that there have been groundbreaking research findings." [24]

Half of all complaints to the Irish Press Council during the state of emergency were related to sensationalist reporting, which is predominantly related to headlines. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, clickbait headlines such as "Coronavirus cannot survive" or "Coronavirus medicine starts selling tomorrow" have been reported in the complaints to the Bosnian Press Council. The Raad voor de Journalistiek in Belgium also received several complaints about headlines that give false and unfounded hopes or those that can upset and shock people who are sick.

### **c. Confusion between reporting and advertising**

The lack of a clear distinction between journalistic content and advertising was also a reason for several complaints to the German Press Council. One such example is the interview for the sale of a 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 hidden advertising, and it was estimated that it could lead to unfounded hopes." [25]

### **d. Insufficient protection of privacy and of personal data**

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

For instance, in Germany, a newspaper conducted a large investigation and identified a small village where the first coronavirus outbreak occurred. This sparked a debate about 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 German Press Council Guidelines for Journalistic Work clearly state that "physical or mental illness or injury is in the domain of the privacy of those affected" (Guidelines 8.4). [26]

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." [27]

A problem identified by press and media councils is not only the naming of those infected with Covid-19 and the victims but also the publication of information that allows the identification of some persons in the media coverage. An example was 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?" [28]

The Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina treated a similar case after 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, which was removed immediately following complaints received by the press council. Yet the list can still be found on some online portals, for which no complaints have been received.

In some countries, there have been complaints about the publication of photographs of medical personnel. In the UK, the self-regulatory body IPSO received complaints from medical workers regarding 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 pointed out that when they under extreme pressure and go through challenging times, such behavior is offensive. "For us, as a self-regulatory body, it was an interesting question about what are the rights of medical workers in these circumstances, because under normal circumstances we would explain that they are in the focus of the public and are presented in a professional light, and that is not in the domain of the private". [29]

In Belgium, there was a case concerning a journalist infiltrated in a Facebook group where doctors were exchanging messages about the coronavirus. Based on the information posted in the group, the journalist contacted the doctor with a request for more details about a specific case, which the doctor considered intrusive. The journalist apologized, explaining that the Facebook group was open, 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?". [30]



Finally, in relation to the protection of privacy, the Austrian Press Council adjudicated a complaint and decided that identity disclosure 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. All the elements should always be considered, and the right balance made." [31]

## **e. Discrimination and stigmatization of the victims**

In Ukraine, the Commission on Journalism Ethics reacted pro-actively (without receiving citizens' complaints) on a case of hate speech against the LGTB community in link with the Covid-19. "The Commission on Journalism Ethics, as a self-regulatory body of journalists and editorial offices, 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 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." (Liza Kuzmenko, Commission on Journalism Ethics in Ukraine, Interview conducted on 19.08.2020.)

## 4. INFORMING AND EDUCATING THE AUDIENCE TO ADDRESS ONLINE DISINFORMATION

As misinformation about the virus has been increasingly spreading online, press and media councils have actively taken the step to tackle this issue and help citizens debunk it. Also, by informing citizens about their right to complain about false information circulating on the virus in the media, as highlighted by the German Press Council. This was done through various activities: taking part in online awareness-raising, participating in TV programs, disseminating micro-learning materials on MIL for citizens, etc.

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." (Interview conducted on 18.08.2020.)

The staff of the Information Council of Catalunya highlighted: "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." (Begoña M., Interview conducted on 01.09.2020) Similarly, the press council of Canada underlined that: "In a time when science is 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." (Brent Jolly and Cara Sabatini, Interview conducted on 21.08.2020.)

"Press councils can protect the public and enhance the importance of professional journalism by helping mainstream media take appropriate steps to verify the information before it is published and make immediate and complete corrections when necessary. They can also promote a public understanding of the difference between the information published by journalists committed to professional and ethical standards and other types of information circulating on social media." (Charlotte Dewar, IPSO, Interview conducted 16.09.2020.)

In general, the crisis has brought forward a major challenge for some press councils in relation to the increasing number of complaints received from citizens about information circulating on social media and not necessarily under the supervision of the self-regulatory body.

To respond to that challenge, the Council of Media Ethics in North Macedonia established a Registry of Professional Online Media, in partnership with the Association of Journalists and the Economic Chamber. The Registry objective is to help the public and business community recognize which online media adhere to the journalistic code of ethics and belong to the press council, and which media have transparent ownership and editorial structure. Another goal is to help the business community identify the media to advertise and accomplish its social responsibility to support the existence of credible and reliable media. The Registry contributed to an increased involvement of online media in the process of self-regulation. The establishment of the Registry of Professional Online Media has been assessed as a "ground-breaking achievement in the field of enhancing self-regulation" [32].

## CONCLUSION

Press councils have shown the critical role they play during the crisis of Covid-19. By strengthening media ethical standards and helping restore public trust in media, they are an important part of the solution to address online disinformation on social media and should be further supported.

Yet, one crucial challenge for press councils, which is not new but is expected to intensify with the pandemic, is the lack of self-sustainability and financial resources for their proper functioning. Such a challenge is particularly evident for press councils in South East Europe whose funding entirely depends 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" [33]. The Board of Directors of the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina has asked the authorities for urgent interventions to help the media and the Council [34], which is struggling to secure financial support for the continuation of its mission. "Unfortunately, we still only depend on projects without stable and long-term financial assistance." [35]

Such concerns about future funding are also expressed by some European self-regulatory bodies such as 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 2020, we will start having a serious problem with funding. Newspapers will try to save, and the Press Council is fully funded by them." [36] In Sweden, similarly the Press Council is mainly funded by major media organizations and the Swedish Radio and Television and said: "So far we have a fairly stable situation. But we assume that the fall in advertising revenues will affect us next year as well." [37]



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