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Journalism in the digital age And the role of media self - regulation

Abstract

The general public has a genuine interest in the quality of news reporting. However, journalism does not meet these expectations quite often. Media self-regulation has an important role to play in monitoring news media professional performance and in reaction to breaches of professional standards, by simultaneously protecting freedom of expression and press freedom, even more so in the digital age. Massive flow of journalistic content is produced and shared digitally, including the use of social networks, which raises the question of accountability and objectivity of information in this new era. The aim of this paper is to explain the potential impact of media self-regulation in the digital age, especially in the context of the frequent use of social networks by news media in reaching out to different audiences. One of the potential influences of solving infor-mation disorder is to build audiences' skills of critical analysis and approach to information. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to both study the practical implementation of media self-regulation in the digital age and the methods of use of media literacy in the critical understanding of information online.

Keywords:
Self-regulation, disinformation, digital era, ethics, media literacy

Introduction

New technologies and platforms are continuously changing journalism landscape today. Technological advances have fostered fragmentation among media publics and created information habits based on algorithms, micro - segmenting, and viral content sharing, usually among peers and closed groups (McNair, 2018).

As a result, new ethical issues started to appear, redefining the relationship between the media and the public. With the advent of the digital age and the social media systems, the sharing and collection of information have become faster and easier than ever, but have also led to the spread of fake information or fake news. Social media have become a platform for people and entities to breed false information and spread their propaganda. However, the institutions that are truly vulnerable in this situation are media organizations. They are increasingly dependent on the same platforms that spread digital disinformation (Horowitz, 2019).

While media freedom needs to be guaranteed, independent journalism is of utmost importance in providing reliable and balanced news of public interest. With new technologies radically reshaping the media landscape, traditional regulatory assumptions have been called into question and, in many cases, existing rules have become counterproductive (Haraszti, 2008).

This reality has confirmed that a system of safeguards is needed, especially in relation to fake news, disinformation and misinformation online. In this context, media self-regulation has an important role to play in fostering public trust in journalism. As Haraszti (2008) explains, it is joint endeavor by media professionals to set up voluntary editorial guidelines and abide by them in a process open to the public.

By doing so, the independent media accept their shared responsibility for the quality of the public discourse in the nation, while fully preserving their editorial autonomy in shaping it.

To ensure that citizens trust the information from the media, ethics and accountability are important. Self-regulation is considered a media accountability instrument, which is aimed at exposing malpractice in journalism by monitoring whether journalists act in compliance with professional standards. Instruments of this kind have been developed in many countries across the world and their role is to define standards of the profession and supervise news media abidance to these standards. One of the strongest advantages of media self-regulation is that it is used as a mechanism to prevent state regulation, thus preserving media freedom and freedom of expression. The Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO, Guy Berger (2020) claims that press councils are crucial in raising standards in the profession, defending it, and convincing the public that it has the ability to respond.

People also have the responsibility to protect themselves from disinformation, fake news and manipulative content. To this end, it is essential that they become critical consumers of news. In this direction, another concept of importance is media literacy. It is considered an important tool in combatting misinformation and disinformation, as outlined in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (EU) 2018/1808. Media literacy should not be limited to learning about tools and technologies, but should aim to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills required to exercise judgment, analyze complex realities and recognize the difference between opinion and fact.

Journalists' engagement with audiences and information sources via social media channels can also be seen as a noteworthy new feature of accountability frameworks that aid self-regulation. These interactions, according to Posetti (2013), allow journalists to publicly and swiftly respond to valid critiques of their work, to instantly correct errors, and to increase the transparency of their practice.

This article will try to explain the ways media self-regulation can contribute in addressing disinformation and unprofessionalism in the media reporting in the digital era and the potential role it can have by building networks with different stakeholders in the society. We specifically analyze the role of the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM), as a self-regulatory body in the country, whose mission also includes addressing the problem of disinformation and misinformation in the media by promoting a code of ethics, professional standards and disseminating media literacy. Its efforts are in line with the commitments by international press councils, which are increasingly discussing their potential role in addressing disinformation and propaganda, especially in relation to the fact that media are increasingly using social media as a way to promote their products.

Methodology and research questions

Literature research will be performed to gather information relevant from previous studies, books and publications, as well as scholarly articles of relevance to our area of study. In addition to this, a secondary data analysis will be performed by using findings from past analyses and research, documents and different publications to elaborate the research problem.

Amongst other, findings from the CMEM's analysis "Journalism, social media and self-regulation: opportunities and challenges" will be used in the context of our research, by analyzing the answers from the in-depth interviews conducted with 20 online media in the period September – October 2021. Experiences and challenges of online media encountered on social media, including the problem of disinformation were discussed at these interviews. We have also analyzed the findings from the statistical overview of the adjudications by the CMEM in 2021 and 2020.

The research methods were used to answer three key questions:

1. What role does media self-regulation play in addressing the problem with disinformation, misinformation and fake news in the digital era?

2. How can press councils partner with other stakeholders to address the problem with disinformation, misinformation and fake news in the media?

3. What kind of initiatives are needed to enhance the role of media self-regulation in encouraging a culture of critical understanding of media contents?

Results

Disinformation and fake news on social media - a serious threat for professional journalism

The growing use of the Internet has increasingly changed the way public gains access to information. Internet users have access to a wider range of information coming from different sources and platforms with a varying degree of observance of the standards for professional reporting. Disinformation, misinformation and incitement to hatred spread in a very short time interval. Social networks are increasingly gaining a greater role in informing the public.

Fact checking, validation, attribution of sources and placing information in the right context are fundamental requirements in journalism. It is important that journalistic work be done, as a starting point, under standards that ensure the quality and rigor of its contents (Cañizález, Hernández, Torrealba: 2020). However, fact-checking becomes difficult given the dynamics of consumption of news on social media and the large volume of content that can be accessed there.

The demand for immediate information also hinders the process of verification, which explains why some journalists and media outlets publish information that is false or misleading (Lelonek, 2020).

Media encounter numerous challenges when publishing content on social media platforms where other news creators operate, and these platforms often serve as venues for spreading false narratives, disinformation, hate speech, etc. According to Dimitrovska (2021), the spread of disinformation is considered a very harmful aspect of the use of social media. Hate speech, disinformation and fake news frequently appear on social networks when media publish articles related to crime, corruption, politics and political affairs, particularly in periods of elections. It is quite often a case when media publish information tackling the LGBT population, gender identity, somebody's ethnicity (ibid).

When people consume disinformation and fake news on social media, professional journalism is impacted in various ways. Fake news creates a false reality that not just one or two people buy into, but thousands, and it creates a reality that those creating the fake news can manipulate to whatever they want it to be. Those lies, if perpetrated, can turn deadly or threaten societal stability (Van der Lans, 2021).

False information about major events, including political events, wars and conflicts, health crises, such as Covid-19, can jeopardize public health and safety. Disinformation as warfare in the digital age may not be so different than any other type of warfare; wars are fought for power, and some benefit economically while the vulnerable suffer the most (Horowitz, 2019).

When journalism becomes a vector for disinformation, this further reduces public trust and promotes the cynical view that there is no distinction between different narratives within journalism on the one hand, and narratives of disinformation on the other (Nery, 2019). Mainstream media can easily become a significant amplifier and disseminator of false stories – even if they, for the most part, cover fake news with an intent to set the record straight and correct the fabricated information.

In Humprecht's opinion (2018) the content of fake news stories differs across national contexts in ways that matches and reflects national journalistic styles and news agendas. This implies that those who create fake news intuitively or deliberately write their stories in ways that match mainstream journalists' news values.

Findings from the 2021 statistical data analysis by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia confirm that the problem of disinformation persist in the news media reporting. One of the most violated articles of the Code of Journalists is Article 1, which refers to inaccurate and unverified information and absence of at least two sources of information. 91,3 percent of the press complaints filed to the media self-regulatory body refer to online media reporting.

In many cases, the complainants react to the fact that information from social media is insufficiently verified and it spills over into the journalistic content. Therefore, one-sided reporting, disinformation and misinformation online continues to be a problem. Data from the statistical analysis confirm that this was also the most reported problem to the Council of Media Ethics in 2020. Again, the percentage of complaints about online media reporting is the biggest – 90,7 (CMEM, 2020).

Media self-regulation is important in the era of disinformation

Establishing the truth and correction of false information in journalism has increased in recent years as a response to the information disorder. Providing citizens with the information they need to make political decisions is among the most highly ranked professional values in surveys of journalists across political contexts (Hanitzsch et al, 2012: 483-504). Journalists and credible media globally perceive that an essential part of their professional duty is to correct manipulation and disinformation. As Rosenstiel and Kovach claim (2001), verification and correction are portrayed in literature as the essence of journalists' professionalism.

The prominence of truth and facts in the professional culture of journalists is reflected in journalists' self-criticism on the role of the news media in the disinformation order (Tsfati et al, 2020). The fact that journalists complain that reporting has become 'increasingly sloppy' and that 'bottom-line pressure is hurting journalism' highlights the professional aspiration for un-sloppy, truthful and accurate reporting (ibid).

Press councils or media self-regulatory bodies have an important role in safeguarding professional integrity, quality, and credibility of media. Their main role is supervision of the application of codes of ethics in the media and safeguarding public against unprofessional, manipulative and abusive journalistic reporting. Increased levels of media professionalism and strong defense of media freedom, which are shared goals of media self-regulatory bodies across the world, can serve as a remedy. Many self-regulatory bodies deal with cases related to media outlets outside their membership and, thus, on one hand exert an indirect pressure on non-members, and on the other hand contribute to the general familiarity with journalistic professional standards (UNESCO, 2019).

According to Puddephatt (2011), self-regulation preserves independence of the media and protects it from partisan government interference. It could be more efficient as a system of regulation as the media understand their own environment better than government (though they may use that knowledge to further their own commercial interests rather than the public interest). Another advantage of the media self-regulation is that it may encourage greater compliance because of peer pressure and it can also drive-up professional standards by requiring media to think about or even develop their own standards of behavior.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, a self-regulatory body in the media, the Council of Media Ethics, has been functioning since 2014. Its main mission is to protect the right of the public to receive objective and complete information, which will be in accordance with ethical norms.

It also takes care of regular implementation of standards in the profession by the media themselves, but also through mediation as a process that raises trust between the public and the media. The mission of this body is to raise public awareness of professional and ethical standards that should be respected by the media. It responds to press complaints about contents published in different types of news media (broadcast media, newspapers, magazines, and associated digital outlets, as well as online media), and engages in public policy debates on freedom of speech.

By providing an independent, efficient and equitable process for resolving press complaints, it works on promoting quality in media content. Spreading media literacy is also part of the organization's commitments. CMEM issues standards of good media practice, which its members must apply. A recent study commissioned by the Council of Media Ethics (Dimitrovska, 2021) highlights the role of professional media in combatting disinformation, propaganda and hate speech in social media, as well as the role of media and journalistic associations. Journalists and editors interviewed as part of this study believe that if media accept media self-regulation and adhere to the professional reporting standards, they would be protected once they publish their contents on social media.

Developing new ethical guidelines to address information disorder

As online disinformation is increasingly becoming the central problem in the public discourse, it calls for a clear understanding about the role of professional journalism in maintaining high ethical standards in terms of truthful and impartial reporting. Furthermore, there is a need for designing a set of principles that can mitigate the effects of disinformation and address the underlying factors that are responsible for its amplification. Across Europe, different press councils, media or journalistic organizations adopt codes of conduct that they commit to follow. All of them have some common points and they generally cover similar categories of ethical conduct. Some of them are necessary for the avoidance of misinformation and others exist for guiding the journalists into better working methods. Commitments related to truthfulness, integrity, respecting the source as well as serving the interest of the society are common to most of the ethical guidelines or codes adopted. Accuracy of information, including truthfulness and integrity, has always been a cornerstone of ethical conduct and a determinant characteristic of trusted news media (Salas, 2018).

To respond to the challenges for professional journalists, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia initiated the development of Guidelines for Ethical Reporting for Online Media. The need to develop these Guidelines arose from the fact that the rise of new information and communication technologies and online media changed the way of creating and disseminating information and posed new challenges to professional journalists. These Guidelines are aimed to be used by editors, journalists and all other content creators working in online media. They are intended to help in the development of a strong and credible online media self-regulation system and in strengthening independent, professional and accountable journalistic reporting in the online sphere. The Guidelines also apply to all information and content that online media publish on social networks or other Internet platforms. One of the provisions in these Guidelines is that online media need to carefully check reliability and credibility of information obtained from social networks, websites, blogs or other Internet sources. In addition to this, online media need to be responsible for regularly reviewing and promptly removing user comments that are published under journalistic content on websites or social networks containing elements of hate speech and having the potential to cause harmful consequences in the society.

Addressing disinformation is also included in another document recently developed by the Council of Media Ethics relating to ethical reporting on children and youth. One of the provisions in the Recommendations concerning ethical reporting about children and youth (CMEM, 2021) highlights the need to establish mechanisms in media pertaining to children and youths' protection against media reporting based on disinformation, political propaganda and agitation, economic manipulation, pornographic contents, religious fanaticism, creating and inciting stereotypes and discrimination on any ground. Another document including a provision for addressing disinformation in social media is the Guidelines for safe and professional reporting on coronavirus (Covid-19). The Guidelines emphasize that journalists and hosts of live programs in the media play an important role in following audience's statements in order to prevent spreading of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech on air. As outlined in the Guidelines, journalists should be especially careful when people involved in live programs share unverified information from social networks. Journalists are also advised to check information on social media before they produce news articles.

To contribute to the efforts for inclusive reporting in the media, the Council of Media Ethics published Guidelines on inclusive media reporting during Covid-19. Journalists are advised to be aware and react to disinformation and hate speech and to review and remove user comments on media websites or social networks that contain hate speech and potentially harmful content.

Failure to comply with ethical codes of conduct and the increased spread of disinformation as a result of it, especially in the online unregulated environment, troubles citizens and affects their trust in the media.

Providing publicity to the ethical adjudications

Ensuring transparency is important with a view to enable citizens to understand how violation of ethical standards happens and how disinformation affects credibility of media reporting. It will give the readers or the audience the maximum and possible attention to the problematic journalistic content. One of the basic duties of any media self-regulatory bodies is securing transparency and publicity of all adjudications taken, as representatives of the public play an important role in their work.

Keeping track of the results of the adjudications provides statistical data about the performance of the medial self-regulatory body and the main ethical breaches and ethical challenges for the journalists. CMEM has a transparent database of the adjudications made by the Press Complaints Commission and it is treated as a good way to build trust and credibility of the self-regulatory body.

In addition to this, the Council has a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, where it publishes its adjudications, alerts and reactions to cases of unprofessional reporting.

Cross-sector partnerships, networks and coalitions

Networking among press and media councils in the region of Western Balkans and in Europe continues to evolve in addressing the problem with disinformation in the digital era.

Troubled by the increasing number of complaints received by press and media councils regarding the proliferation, amplification, and promotion of potentially harmful online content, including disinformation and hate speech, the press and media councils from Southeast Europe and Turkey adopted a joint declaration on strengthening media ethics in the digital era in November 2021 (UNESCO, 2021). The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia is also a signatory of this Declaration.

The adoption of the document is considered as a strong call for increased adherence of online media actors to ethical and professional media standards and a call to various stakeholders to strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of media self-regulation.

At the national level, CMEM keeps a strategic dialogue with different stakeholders and works together with policy-makers, regulatory authorities, judiciary, political leaders, journalists, civil society, academics, and educators, to help them understand the role of media self-regulation and identify further possibilities to combat harmful practices in media, such as disinformation and incitement to hatred.

Cooperation between the media regulator and the self-regulatory body is one of the key relations that needs to be developed, especially in several areas, such as promotion of media pluralism, prevention of hate speech and discriminatory speech, as well as and promotion of media literacy. An additional area in which the activities of the self-regulatory body and the regulator intersect is media literacy (Stojcevski, 2017).

To effectively address the problem of proliferation of hate speech, disinformation and discrimination in the media, CMEM committed to establishing partnerships with high education institutions, the media regulator, the Ombudsman and civil society organizations in discussing these problems. The Economic Chamber of Macedonia also committed to supporting media-self regulation by joining the initiative for establishment of the Registry of Professional Online Media, which urged its members to advertise only in online media that are part of the Registry. The main purpose of the Registry is to contribute to the process of professionalization in the work of online media, thereby enhancing their credibility as well as recognizing those who uphold to standards in comparison to unethical media that cause damage to the reputation of professional online media.

Promoting strong collaboration among media councils, media self-regulatory bodies, independent media regulators and networks of journalists is one of the recommended actions aimed at fostering journalistic standards contained in the European Democracy Action Plan (EU, 2020).

Media literacy is important

The competencies of digital and media literacy include the ability to make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas; analyze messages in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose and point of view, and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content; create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound and new digital tools and technologies; reflect on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical principles; and take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and nation and by participating as a member of a community (Hobbs, 2010).

Media literate individuals are not only consumers of information and media content, but they are able to critically assess information and media content, to ethically and effectively use information, and engage with all forms of media. Press councils have recognized that education of strategic audiences and stakeholders is an impor-tant pillar of effective media self-regulation. With this in mind, they have all developed media and information literacy activities to develop the critical thinking of media users (UNESCO, 2019). Press councils in the region of South East Europe organize lectures and seminars, invest in research and some have set online libraries with media ethics related subjects.

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia joined the Media Literacy Network in the country in 2017. It was established by the media regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. This Network is created in order to facilitate the communication and consultations between different entities in the country working on raising the level of media literacy of all citizens.

The spreading of media literacy is one of the more important goals in the work of CMEM. Respondents in the research commissioned by Association of Journalists of Macedonia (Stojcevski, 2017) suggest that CMEM should intensify its efforts through campaigns, workshops and greater media presence and that coordinated cooperation and activities with the regulator is necessary. It is considered that it is also necessary to develop cooperation between CMEM and institutions working in the field of higher and secondary education, civil society, informal working groups, as well as with public institutions, such as the Ministry of Education. The Media Literacy Network opens up opportunities for a collaboration of this kind.

Discussion of the results

Media self-regulation plays an important role in combatting disinformation, fake news, hate speech and discrimination, both in traditional and online media. It is considered the most efficient concept in regulating journalistic conduct, without interference of centers of power of any kind.

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia is increasingly getting involved in debates with relevant stakeholders to address new digital issues, such as misinformation and disinformation. Together with other press councils across the region and EU, it strongly advocates for using self-regulation as a way to address these phenomena instead of introduction of new laws or legislation that would give the power to politicians and governments to intervene or evaluate what is being published online.

In order to achieve satisfying results in combatting disinformation, it proves that the press council should continuously improve its collaboration and partnership with organizations like other press councils, education organizations, academies, journalistic associations, drawing upon their experience and expertise in order to reach the greatest possible part of the population. It should also be part of the initiatives to cooperate with governments, regulatory authorities and relevant state institutions that deal with media literacy in an attempt to create systemic approach to addressing disinformation.

The media self-regulatory body could be also involved in initiatives aimed at raising awareness among digital media users about the role and importance of media ethics. To increase the impact of its work, the media self-regulatory body should continuously use its infrastructure and tools to display the relevant information to the users and inform them about the ways to distinguish a false content from a real one.bout the ways to distinguish a false content from a real one.

Conclusions

Misinformation and disinformation in the digital era have become a serious problem because of the ease with which material can be conveyed, especially in the era of a rapid digital infrastructure development. Ensuring freedom of speech and the press also implies that there is a proper appreciation of the responsibilities involved—ideally that what is published is true and published with good motives. However, regulating and controlling such responsibilities is increasingly becoming more difficult.

Stronger media self-regulation is a significant part of the solution, but is by no means sufficient, especially if there is no commitment and collaboration by different stakeholders in the society, such as the civil sector, education, media, journalistic associations, the regulator, regulatory bodies for prevention of discrimination, etc.

The responsibility to critically assess, fact-check and seek balance remains vital and a greater challenge in the current media environment. Different methods can be used to avoid misinformation and disinformation in the digital era. Strengthening and supporting media self-regulation is considered to be one of the most efficient mechanisms, which can help to avoid excessive regulation and the introduction of new regulatory restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. This includes collaboration among several stakeholders in the society for the purpose of transforming their various interests into active mobilization and engagement, which would enable the utilization of the capacities of each individual actor. Self-regulation can then yield a responsive, acceptable and systematic solution to current concerns (Price, Verhulst, 2020).

Media self-regulation helps convince the public that the free media are not irresponsible. By promoting standards, self-regulation helps maintain the media's credibility with the public. This, according to Haraszti (2008) is particularly welcome in new democracies, most of which are also new to an independent press. Self-regulation also protects independency in journalists' work, without interference by those in power. Whether passed in good will or not, any attempt to impose standards on journalists by law will result in arbitrary limitation of their legitimate freedoms, and restriction of the free flow of information in society (ibid). Press councils should, therefore, stand against any efforts for legislation of this nature, even if it is result of substantial concerns that citizens might be disinformed or misinformed. This highlights the important role that press councils can play in addressing the problem of disinformation and misinformation, thus preventing governments to take this responsibility.

On the other hand, without user involvement, the self-regulatory mechanism will not accurately reflect user needs, and it cannot be effective in delivering the standards it promotes, which will in turn fail to create confidence among the public. One of the ways to directly involve citizens in combatting the problem of disinformation and misinformation is by spreading the media literacy efforts. This will help in building critical skills which will enable citizens to assess content appearing on online media and social media. Eventually, media should also make responsible and reasonable use of social media.

Common standards are needed to build confidence in the quality of the media products. The standards and operating principles in the self-regulatory system also need to be continuously updated to reflect the challenges that the digitalization brings.

Limitations

The paper attempted to identify the methods to address challenges in journalism as result of the fast spreading of disinformation and misinformation in the digital era and measures to deal with them. However, practical application and assurance of success are beyond the control of this paper. Disinformation and fake news never cease to exist and it is not always easy to track them. Media literacy and media self-regulation can help the audience gain the critical skills needed to assess media contents, but they do not produce immediate results. Moreover, citizens can only be advised not to trust all the information available in media and social platforms, but they cannot be obliged to research the authenticity of it before spreading it.

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