

Ordinary Media Diseases in Extraordinary Times

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In a state of emergency and in "peacetime", the media, for better or worse, are what they are¹. So we wouldn't be mistaken to say that in an unusual situation they have retained their straight face. This isn't, however, a media peculiarity. The powers that be – the subject that the media should investigate and make its actions known to the public, also looks like itself. The society the press works for is also the same. And just as the coronavirus most severely attacks organisms with comorbidities, so the state of emergency has exacerbated many of the usual weaknesses or the typical chronic conditions of the media environment.

During the state of emergency triggered by COVID-19, the Bulgarian media did not become more accurate in terms of the messages they transmit. But they weren't less accurate than usual either. The media in our country face two significant challenges: to convey information accurately and, secondly, to learn how to be critical over again. These two problems are not related to the way the epidemic is being covered. They were visible before it came – and will remain visible when it is gone.

The way the media find, check, process and subsequently communicate information to their users is the key issue in Bulgaria. And it may have something to do with a certain loss of reflex. The latter has its explanation, but if we started getting down to the nuts and bolts of it, it would take reams of paper. If we try to squeeze it into a few words, due to the centralization of power in our country during the last ten years, the only source of information, the ultimate truth sayer is now Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. Such sinking of political life and its reduction to a single figure, who always has the final say on all sorts of issues, has made journalists somewhat lazy (insofar as media coverage in the mainstream media depends on them and not on editorial policy).

Years ago, reporters used to check the veracity of what those in power said. Now instead of questioning, they relay the messages down to the public. If the "ultimate truth sayer" declares it is snowing in summer, it is almost certain that most news headlines will say the same.

This kind of media attitude to the government makes the public instinctively distrust journalists for simply relaying what the powers that be had to say. That is why reporters, unfortunately, have long since stopped being perceived as those intermediaries who might

¹ This piece reflects journalist Polina Paunova's intervention during the discussion titled, "Communication rights, media and state of emergency" within the "The State of Emergency: The New Meaning of Old Things" series of Sofia University's Cultural Centre.

give us the truth. In the general case, the journalist is perceived as someone who has chosen the side of the regime - the poodle that pretends to be doing something while blissfully cuddled in his master's lap, instead of the "mad dog" that guards the truth. And we all know who the master is.

After all, a journalist is not a judge or an arbitrator. This caveat is needed to make it clear that the journalist cannot say "this is the truth". However, the journalist must be able to present the facts skilfully – that is, once having made an effort to find them.

In recent months, it has become crystal clear that hounding facts and answers has become so exotic (instead of being a routine) that even reporters' attempts to figure circumstances by asking questions was construed as hostility not only by the embodiments of power (e.g. government officials, crisis headquarters members, even the opposition) but also by society at large. It turned out that the very users of information have drifted out of the custom to see journalists actively looking for this information. Some of the comments regarding question-prone reporters have been quite telling. More than once they have been qualified as confrontation seekers. This kind of attitude, unfortunately, is a symptom of dead reflexes among the journalists themselves, and by extension of the audience as well.

Another topic emerged as problematic during the coronavirus epidemic and its coverage – expertise. The capability to grasp reality at deeper levels seems to have been largely lost in this country, both by journalists and their audience. The more significant trouble is that the crisis has revealed a lack of expertise among policymakers and public figures as well. All this together paints a less-than-cheerful picture of mediocrity.

A few final touches: the coronavirus and the constant hunger for information on the subject created a public need for journalists over again. Indeed, this didn't go without glitches: in Bulgaria, most of the major media decided to go reporter-free and broadcast live all press conferences. Such a "lazy" technique disqualifies the press from their own game because it is within their definition to select the essential information, to check the facts, etc. (Let's avoid the repetition here). But these live broadcasts have shown the audience what's going on "from nature": the powers that be, the journalists and the dynamic between them alike. This might be useful. Of course, it might be misunderstood as well.

Perhaps COVID-19 has drowned out most of the other topics in the public debate. But they have never enjoyed a mass audience in Bulgaria. So the situation is exactly as it was

before – in terms of quality of information and sources thereof, and in terms of crucial topics and quality of perception.