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State of emergency: attempts to redefine the role of the media

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Journalists, media publishers and public figures have been trying to revisit journalism throughout the COVID-related emergency period (13.04. –13.05.2020).

Government officials and MPs have made statements demanding that new borders are set for journalism and freedom of expression. The prosecution office has investigated physicians, pharmacists and civil servants because of the opinions they voiced. The main argument of the investigation authorities was that their views created panic. The key information that institutions have been so protective of was related to protective equipment used by medical staff and the ongoing developments on the medicine market.

The only way for the audience to learn the official information is when officials answer journalists' questions. But instead of putting in place regulated relations between institutions and media, MPs from the IMRO¹ political group, during the very first week of the emergency state, on 19 March, put forward amendments to the Radio and Television Act aimed at restricting the freedom of expression. On 20 March the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) declared the draft unconstitutional. In the opinion of the AEJ, the IMRO MPs "also propose penal repression by insisting that whoever spreads false information using speech, the press or other media, electronic information systems or **in any other way**, should be punishable by imprisonment of up to three years "².

In several interviews in a row, public figures sent messages linking the restriction of individual rights and freedoms with the new measures. Minister Vladislav Goranov said, "*Now is not the time to discuss democracy*" (in an interview for BNR's *Nedelya 150*³ on 22 March 2020), and MRF MP Yordan Tzonev (for BNT's *Panorama*⁴ on 10 April 2020): "*We can do without certain rights and keep quiet for a while.*"

No evidence, however, exists that the restriction of freedom of expression and speech protects the population against infection. Quite the opposite, pluralism of opinions in the media allows the audience to obtain information using the arguments of expertise rather than those of power structures and law enforcement authorities. The cooperation between government institutions and the media during a crisis could have positive effects. However, instead of trying to establish a mode of collaboration, some government representatives have

¹ Internal Macedonian-Edirne Revolutionary Organisation, a far right nationalist political party represented in Bulgarian Parliament and currently a part of the ruling coalition.

² IMRO's bill to amend the Radio and Television Act is completely unconstitutional. [AEJ. 20.03.2020.](#)

³ *Nedelya 150*. [BNR. 22.03.2020](#)

⁴ *Panorama*. [BNT. 22.03.2020](#)

attempted to define the content of journalists' work. We could mention the minister of economy, Emil Karanikolov, the chair of the parliamentary culture committee and former culture minister, Vezhdi Rashidov, and indirectly the financial minister Vladislav Goranov who labelled people with liberal professions "marginalized" (he later explained that he meant people who failed to pay their social security contributions). Instead of using the trust that different groups have in various media in channelling official information about the introduced measures to the public, government officials preferred to regulate the limitations of the profession through public speaking during the crisis.

The *Bivol* website launched an investigation into the delivery of 15 tonnes of medical supplies from the UAE in the fight against the coronavirus. The journalists believed that the central part of the delivery consisted of dates while the protective equipment amounted to approximately 3 tonnes.⁵ The publication pointed out that 32 tonnes of meat and dairy products were exported in exchange. The minister of economy responded by claiming that the medical supplies were a donation. Minister Karanikolov's attitude to the media shows that some government institutions and public figures are incapable of acknowledging that their activities are public and visible.⁶ Transparency is particularly relevant in times of crisis, and the media could be quite helpful in convincing audiences that the measures are meaningful. Instead, representatives of various institutions attempted to redefine the role of media and journalists into incapacitating them as a counterbalance to the powers that be. Economy minister Emil Karanikolov said, "The media should be checking whether the dates have reached the people in need instead of counting them".⁷ Amusingly enough, one of the sites of Domuschiev brothers' group, Darik News, published statements by unspecified "nutritionists" and anonymous individuals referred to as "scientists": "Dates – the food for longevity and good health." (Darik News, 5.05.2020) But isn't the meddling into media's public functions by the government a form of interference into their content as well?

For the sake of ensuring access to information by all citizens, the government has tried to crowd out the media in one of its key functions, i.e. to provide different groups with means of communication. The government press centre arranged for a sign language of all statements, and it was used by all televisions which received the BNT broadcast. **The state's replacement role amounts to interference in the media content because the media failed**

⁵ [Bivol, 15.04.2020](#)

⁶ [Darik News, 5.05.2020](#)

⁷ [bTV newscast, 23.04.2020](#)

to perform its task of ensuring sign language or other means of translation. Thus, the government took away the responsibility from the media's governing bodies since they failed to provide access to a particular group of the society, which is regulated by law. This "positive" interference by the government conceals the failure of the public media, as well as that of the media regulator, to do their job. The crisis revealed the existing deficits of BNT broadcasts: educational programmes of rather a short duration and failing to ensure access to content by people with hearing impairments.

The government's temporary solution in dealing with the problem of information during the pandemic by ensuring translation served as a reminder of the **responsibility of both public and private televisions to invest in various platforms** to reach out to almost 120 000 people (the number of people with hearing impairments in our country). What was used during the state of emergency was only one out of many ways to ensure access to information by people with hearing impairments: a translator visible on the small right-hand screen.

Change in the relations between sources of information and journalists: control over the information about the identities of infected people

During the two months, the institutions that supplied information (the National Coronavirus Operational Centre, the government) and hospitals demonstrated unprecedented **control over the news** about infected people. Unlike other cases of road accidents and crimes, the bodies of patients infected with the coronavirus during the emergency measures were not exposed to recording cameras. No relatives of sick and infected people were questioned during television broadcasts.

Obtaining health-related information is a question of negotiations between the media that we refer to as tabloids and representatives of healthcare establishments. Supplying and publishing information about patients' health status, ethnicity, age, and other personal data constitutes a violation of their right to privacy. This is a positive trend that depends on the demand and supply of information concerning patients' data.

The issues related to the infection and the results of protective measures are dwindling, and some media dropped out any news revealing the private lives of crime or road accident victims. This was the trend during the first three weeks of the emergency state. Then a group of subsequent news reports was observed in almost all media, having the same source: Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev. In the period of this study, Ivan Geshev was seen on several occasions, accompanied by journalists, to inspect the homes of older people who had

become victims of violence, robbery, molestation, or threats. This recourse to the "old" way of news reports on violence-related issues is observed only in information concerning the Prosecutor General. The stories and images of crime victims are an essential part of the image of the prosecutor's institution. But the media content in a state of emergency showed that it is possible to re-negotiate the terms of covering journalist crime stories without actually withholding information about them.

However, some media have clung to their role as a moral threat to inconvenient journalists. The investigative journalism of Venelina Popova concerning problems with MP Delyan Peevski's donations has been given negative coverage by *Monitor* and *Telegraph* media.

In other instances (broadcasts of the three national coverage channels, BNT, bTV and Nova TV), journalists themselves have chosen a role to name and shame persons castigated as "offenders" of the measures introduced by the government. They distinguished three broad groups of people, referred to as "the young", "the Roma" and "the retired" who posed a threat to public order and health. However, for the sake of older people's health, the media allowed a process that we could call **silent age discrimination** since in practice misdemeanours vis-à-vis the measures is not a question of ethnicity or age, but a personal choice.

The problems of journalism are an echo of the aggravated economic state of some media, non-transparency of the online publishing market and increased political interference in the case of the BNT through statements by the Chair of the National Assembly's Culture and Media Committee, Mr Vezhdi Rashidov.