

JOURNALISM AND GLOBAL CRISIS: CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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Abstract

As a global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected journalism and the media.

The subject of interest is journalism in conditions of a global crisis. The main research question of the research is: “What are the challenges that journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

The main goal of the research is to determine the challenges that journalism and the journalists in the Republic of Macedonia faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative methodological techniques were used for the realization of the research, i.e. semi-structured in-depth interviews.

A general conclusion can be drawn from the interviews that journalists had to tackle a difficult challenge which impacted their mental and physical health. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface a lot of gaps in regard to the government treatment, the public and journalists and emphasized the need for systematic changes.

Keywords: challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, journalism, media, Republic of Macedonia

1. Introduction

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic first entered and entirely took over the global scene at the start of 2020, the journalists' task to collect and distribute accurate information became extremely challenging. Journalists have been reporting on the virus situation all the while fearing for their own health. Their working conditions, organizing their workloads, the manner in which they were sourcing information, the sources they used, and the way in which they talked to their interlocutors – all this changed. The drastic changes to daily life opened many new problems to journalists and resurfaced old issues that have been persisting for decades. Have journalists responded to their professional task professionally and with dignity at a time when their own lives have been brought into question?

Starting from the fact that journalists exist within the communication ecology in which their work influences and is influenced by the surrounding environment, it was interesting to research what was the communication ecology like when the pandemic (and everything it brought) occupied people's lives and existence. The facts say that "journalists discursively placed themselves in a responsible but vulnerable position within the communication ecology – not solely as a result of the pandemic but also from environmental conditions that long preceded it. Journalists found their reporting difficult during the pandemic and sought to mitigate the forces challenging their work as they sought to reverse the flow of misinformation" (Perreault & Perreault, 2021)

This qualitative research carried out by a research team from the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research had the goal of analysing the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had (and probably still has) on journalists in the Republic of Macedonia and their day-to-day activities. The main research question was what were the professional challenges and difficulties that journalists faced during a global health crisis while the country was making the greatest effort to manage the newly created crisis on a health, economic and political level and how this reflected on their personal lives.

2. The role of journalists during a health crisis

Major crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the basic need for reliable, verified and credible information. In this context, "the social role of journalism is more crucial than ever, but practising this profession is even more difficult" (The Vital Role of Journalism in Times of Crisis, 2020). Hence, what was the role of journalists? The answer to this question starts with defining the primary role of a journalist in this new health crisis: informing with "credible, unbiased and understandable information on all aspects of such a crisis, but also of countering the disinformation that is spreading faster than the virus". Journalists had to be the ones to provide "medical and health information about the virus and how to protect oneself from it". Furthermore, this crisis created a need for journalists to be in the role of someone "who understands the social, political and economic consequences of the pandemic. For journalists, this means being able to question the authorities about their choices and the

implementation of their decisions”. Journalists were also expected to strike “the right balance between emergency information, public service information, ‘constructive’ information and uncompromising investigations into the responses of the governments and administrations concerned” (The Vital Role of Journalism in Times of Crisis, 2020).

Moreover, it is a fact that at the beginning of the crisis, journalists were less concerned with investigative journalism or making stories more dramatic. They and their audience were more interested in knowing what happened and how to stay safe (The Media’s Role in a Crisis, Disaster, or Emergency, n.d.). All these characteristics to the role of journalists, in reality, became vital aspects, even if they have always stood for the journalism’s mission, and have become absolutely necessary in a time of crisis, especially a health crisis such as the one we have been living in for the last two years.

A research study that focused on the self-perception of journalists about what is their role during the pandemic showed that the role of journalists changes when they are reporting on health crises compared to situations when there is no crisis, especially not a potentially dangerous one. Hence, journalists say that the crisis changed their role and they have become “public mobilizers”, professionals in a “role responsible to classify risks” and that “they have changed from watchdogs into cooperatives”. Simply, they had to become less critical and more cooperative and empathetic towards all events because those events were life-threatening. Furthermore, the research findings showed that both professionalism and education are also important when it comes to how journalists understand and perform their roles. Namely, specialist reporters (appropriately trained) believed that they are better equipped to deal with the challenges of health crisis coverage, such as balancing and remaining critical with co-operation with authorities in their efforts to contain crises. Specialist reporters also believed that they are less likely to get swayed by the panic often accompanying health crises than general reporters are (Klemm, Das & Hartmann, 2019).

While we are still on the topic of the journalist’s role, especially in times of disaster and crisis, it should be emphasized that journalism also serves as a conduit for communications from public officials and experts to the broader public, which is known as the facilitative role of journalism and means that in times of crisis journalists conceive of and operate their role given what they perceive their audience needs. In the “facilitative” role, the journalist’s purpose is to monitor and carefully observe the environment for “relevant information about events, conditions, trends and threats” (Christians et al. in Perreault and Perreault, 2021) and is operated in a response to a perceived need for collaboration to try to answer the audience’s need for cooperation. In fact, the facilitative role draws on an understanding that the journalist is responsible to society and perhaps contributes to the public’s decision making in a crisis (Perreault and Perreault, 2021).

To sum up, the COVID-19 crisis across the world has posed a daunting challenge to journalism as a discipline, changing the journalist’s role and “the journalistic competencies necessary in such crisis times, with which journalists can strengthen their role in society by shifting its standards and norms under a transformative and interdisciplinary perspective, which for a long time has been hindered by the inertia of the industry and industry-centered journalism education” (Estella, 2020).

3. Mental health of reporters during the COVID-19 pandemic

One safety aspect that is often overlooked, but has become especially relevant during the pandemic, is the risk related to mental health.

Work-related stress is not new for journalists, especially those that report from conflict zones. But nowadays stress is different, says reporter Hill: “As a journalist, you have to be consuming news all day long, which means being plugged into the Twitter firehose. It is kind of like sticking your face over the Chernobyl reactor and just staring into the radiation for like 10-12 hours a day because you’re sitting at home” (Podkovyoff Lewis, 2020).

During a webinar organized by Investigative Reporters and Editors, Al Tompkins from Poynter Institute said his biggest concern is that journalists don’t spend enough time decompressing outside of their work and reflected on the situation majority of journalists are in: “Most people check their phones right before they fall asleep, sometimes in the middle of the night and usually as soon as they wake up, which induces stress and burnout” (Podkovyoff Lewis, 2020).

Testimonies by most journalists indicate that reporting on the COVID-19 impacted their mental health (More work, less pay: COVID-19 worsens plight of stressed-out Balkan reporters, 2020). The findings from a relevant survey of 73 journalists from international news organizations showed that the majority of respondents (around 70%) “suffer from some level of psychological distress”, and that “26% have clinically significant anxiety compatible with the diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder which includes symptoms of worry, feeling on edge, insomnia, poor concentration, and fatigue”. A certain number of respondents (around 11%) reported “prominent symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which include recurrent intrusive thoughts and memories of a traumatic COVID-19-related event, a desire to avoid recollections of the event, and feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror and shame” (Selva & Feinstein, 2020).

Again a high 70% of journalists (out of 1,406 journalists, editors and other media workers from 125 countries in the world) featured as respondents identified “the mental health impacts from covering the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult challenge”, and 82% reported at least one negative emotional or psychological reaction as a result of the pandemic (Posetti, Bell & Brown, 2020).

Following this aspect of the journalists’ work, the testimonies and findings from various surveys only confirm the need for training and education on mental resilience and mental health protection in times of pandemics and other crises and high stress situations.

„I have learnt how to evaluate my mental resilience and prepare myself before going to sensitive conflict areas or interviewing people who suffer from trauma. This helps me to deal with stressful situations and to apply the knowledge I have gained from the training in my daily routines“, says Aung Aung Htoo, who worked as a journalist at Radio Free Asia’s Rakhine Programme for three years, and has faced many challenging situations in the field, from verbal assault to physical safety risks due to the highly conflictive situation in Rakhine State (Supporting journalism around the world in times of COVID-19, 2021).

4. Research methodology

This study on the challenges of journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic is part of the research project “Political, juridical and cultural challenges in dealing with the pandemic”, conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research – Skopje within the integrative functions of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. This text has also come about from the authors’ involvement in the activities of the Global Risk Journalism Hub (GRJH), an international network of experts in communications, media and journalism. The research is led by the main research question: “What are the challenges that journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

In order to arrive at an answer to this question and identify the challenges of journalism in the Republic of Macedonia in conditions of a global crisis, the research was carried out in two phases. The first phase consisted of an online survey, whereas the second phase delivered an in-depth semi-structured interview aimed at producing more detailed information. The research was done from October until December 2021.

Here, the focus is on the second phase of the research, hence presenting and analysing received data and results from interviews with journalists. The instrument for carrying out the interview was prepared by the working group of Global Risk Journalism Hub. The questionnaire for the interview consisted of six parts:

- general information about the journalist,
- perception of the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health crisis,
- the narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health crisis,
- sources of information used during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- presence of misinformation and fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- risks reflected on individual level.

Given the scope of the questionnaire and the topics and aspects covered, the focus here is on just a few of them: **the general problems in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Macedonia from the journalists’ point of view; the general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia; the individual risks and challenges for journalists arising from the COVID-19 pandemic; the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and the need for education on trauma and receiving appropriate support; the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the journalists’ point of view.**

In regard to the sample, a strategy of selection via the principle of intentional sample was used. Thus, journalists were selected based on two criteria: those that have long years of work experience as media experts and are regarded with an esteem in their profession. The

sample consists of journalists employed by “Telma”, “Alfa”, “Kanal 5”, “Sitel”, TV 24, MTV, MIA, “Prizma”– six television stations, an information agency and an Internet portal in the Republic of Macedonia. Hence, all journalists included in the sample have over ten years of work experience in journalism, all of them have worked in different types of media during their professional career and at different positions, and some of the journalists in the sample are also part of academia.

Because of the specific living and working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the specific position of journalists and their work engagements, the process of finding appropriate interlocutors and conducting interviews was more difficult and posed a big challenge. Consequently, although a large number of journalists in the Republic of Macedonia was contacted for the goals of the research, interviews were carried out with only ten journalists.

The results, that is to say the information from the interviews are to follow, organized thematically, adding specific examples via quotations from the answers by journalists, as key findings for the main research question and the entire research on the challenges about reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. The names and surnames of those interviewed will not be revealed and instead codes are to be used referring to quotations from the answers in order to maintain anonymity.

5. Research findings and a narrative-descriptive analysis

The following part will present an analysis of received answers and illustrating them via quotations from the interviews with journalists.

5.1. General problems in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Macedonia from the journalists’ point of view

The final analysis of the answers by journalists paints a picture that shows that the country dealt (and still is) inappropriately with the pandemic. The answers brought to light a situation of an insufficient hospital capacity and inappropriately equipped health institutions. Health management was assessed as chaotic, inappropriate and motivated by political interests. Journalists reported that relevant experts were unavailable to the media and there was absence of debates and forums.

“As journalists, we can’t find expert epidemiologists that would explain to the public what type of disease this is, and we begged them for information. The forecasts on what would happen were often wrong, which gives me the right to conclude that we don’t have experts in that field. We didn’t have hospital capacity; decisions were often made overnight without any basis. Entire departments were closed off overnight and even clinics. Our healthcare was chaotic before, but since the pandemic started it’s been completely shattered. The

experts didn't have a unified stand and were confusing the public. Decisions were made politically" (#1).

Government measures for overcoming socioeconomic problems were assessed as "ad-hoc solutions, especially in the most vulnerable areas" (#10). The management of the economic crisis in which the citizens found themselves was assessed as benefitting employers and harming employees, with trade unions playing a minor role in the entire process:

"What, as a trade unionist, really bothered me in the Government attempts to cover the economic losses arisen from the crisis was that the main negotiators were almost always the chambers, the employers, whereas the employees and trade unions were a minority. In this context, the Government did everything it can to 'save' the big business owners and tycoons and almost nothing to maintain the living standard for the workers and small business owners" (#4).

All of the above can be summed up in the answer by one of the interviewed journalists, who lists all the key problems in dealing with the health crisis, from crisis management and socioeconomic shortages to the overall poor conditions of the health system, the response by relevant institutions and the selective abundance by posed measures:

"Primarily, problems with the management and organization of resources. Macedonia is a poor country with limited resources and a weak economy and as such had to 'fight for oxygen' alongside much more developed countries. In this sense, there were problems in being able to hospitalize the infected, lack of hospital beds, exhausted medical staff... Also, Macedonia started the process of immunization relatively late, therefore a large number of people, including myself, were forced to get vaccinated in neighbouring Serbia. The crisis de facto showed that there are double standards at play, because while the protective measures were in place the abundance to laws was selective to some people" (#2).

From all of the above, it can be concluded that general problems in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Macedonia from the journalists' point of view include: inappropriate crisis, health and socioeconomic management, lack of experts and of unified stand and making political decisions.

5.2. Overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia

The journalists and journalism as a whole faced a big challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic that led to a complete change in working conditions in this area and within all media. Journalists were at the frontlines and reported on the pandemic putting themselves in danger from many aspects. Above all, their physical health was under threat, but the pandemic also had a big impact on the mental health of journalists and their socioeconomic situation was under question. In addition, during a pandemic that brought a lot of uncertainty and many unknowns for people everywhere, journalists were caught in the middle between

the vast number of information, misinformation and fake and sensationalist news and the public which they were obliged to inform on time and in accurate fashion. They were also torn between the relevant institutions and the public, and this changed journalism as a profession. What is especially important is that the global health crisis shed light on all the “holes” in regard to the journalists’ training on reporting on global crises and the lack of professionalism and ethics in their reporting.

“Every crisis reveals the anomalies of a system, and such was the case with COVID-19 too. Across the entire world, including us, the coronavirus pointed to the “holes” in society, the areas we need to work on and improve. The lack of professional journalists was noticeable, the way of receiving and reporting such news was so important and creating public hysteria showed that the country needs trained experts in this area“ (#6).

In conditions of a global pandemic that includes rolling out unpopular measures, such as social isolation and quarantine, journalists were faced with three main challenges: access to relevant sources, reorganization of editorial staff including doing work online with fewer staff members and dealing with the financial crisis.

The main official source appears to be “the Minister in the role of a spokesperson that reads out information every day” (#1). Asking journalist questions becomes almost impossible because “all press conferences were online” (#1). And receiving information from the field, which is to say, from the hospitals, was neither allowed nor safe to do: “nobody dared to think of going there... we were very scared to enter the clinics“ (#1).

The change in living conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a change in the work of editorial staff, as well which meant “work in shifts with reduced number of staff aimed at protecting personal health“ (#9).

Event coverage becomes the main challenge for the editorial staff:

“It became clear that we couldn’t go to events and interview people directly, we couldn’t invite interlocutors to our studios... there were restrictions on movements, and the curfew entirely disabled our work. Suddenly, we could no longer do our job in the way we knew how up until then“ (#10).

Shifting events from the physical to the online space impacted the way that “media owners had to ‘learn’ that they can also create cheaper programs, so instead of the journalist going to the event, this is now done online which cuts down production costs“ (#2). The entire crisis caused by the pandemic reflected on the financial condition of journalists:

“Some of our colleagues had salary cuts, a few were even dismissed and started court procedures about their dismissals“ (#2);

„The situation with journalism in Macedonia is very difficult and the crisis only made it worse. A lot of media for a small population, an opportunity for many speculations and public manipulation, misinformation on account of certain interest groups“ (#3).

As for the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia, a conclusion can be drawn that the main effects of the pandemic are seen in the change of the working conditions and the change in journalism as a profession, also in the endangerment of the psychophysical health of journalists and in finding relevant and credible sources of information.

5.3. Individual risks and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic

Given the specific work of a journalist, work that generally brings all kinds of challenges and risks, it is especially important to put in context the risks and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the interviewed journalists emphasize that they faced big challenges when reporting during the pandemic which was a lot of pressure, and an additional obstacle was the lack of confidence by the public and even stigmatization and discrimination:

“The pandemic hit us all. I was affected by it professionally as a journalist, as well as personally. I work under a lot of pressure inflicted by the crisis, and on the other hand I face people who are showing resistance, who don’t believe that the virus exists or in the vaccines... To those people we are the main target, the journalists, and they accuse us that we are making it up, that we are creating tensions and disturb their peace. It is a challenge to still be up to the task and keep on reporting professionally, to hear about disease and death, to publish sad stories for almost two years, it’s exhausting“ (#7).

Apart from all the professional challenges, journalists were also challenged on a personal level during the COVID-19 pandemic in that they had to think of a way to protect themselves and their closest:

“I got COVID. This was a major stress factor, because of all the stories that you can die. I live alone and somehow, I got really scared. My colleagues kept checking on me, bringing me everything I needed, but I found the uncertainty really stressful” (#1);

“Fear from death, although I didn’t have time to think, I’m a single mother... if I’m gone my child won’t have parental care... you’re so terrified because you know more than the others“ (#5);

“Mental health, mental pressure, guilty conscious because via the many contacts from work I can bring the virus to my family, the inability to understand the seriousness of our profession by the public, bringing stigma and discrimination instead“ (#6).

Thus, the individual risks and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic include: work under much bigger pressure, a lot of anxiety, but also discrimination from the public.

5.4. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and the need for training on trauma and appropriate support

One of the key aspects related to the COVID-19 pandemic was its impact on mental health. This is especially visible in a profession such as journalism, because journalists were in an exposed position reporting on the pandemic and witnessed almost all negative elements of this global health crisis. As one of the interlocutors says:

“This COVID situation is like the one my colleagues went through when reporting on the war in 2001... they were on their feet, reporting, but immediately afterwards they would say ‘my hair has gone white... I need to see a psychiatrist’, even though they were only reporting on the situation“ (#5).

What is paramount in terms of mental health protection is that the journalists in the Republic of Macedonia do not believe they are sufficiently prepared and trained to report on critical situations and they emphasize this gap in the education system, but also in the absence of any type of education and support by the organizations/institutions where they work:

“All working journalists, especially those covering healthcare, have to be trained on trauma – this is most necessary and urgent. We go into forensic pathology units, into homes of people with amputated legs, people who have cancer – we go through all of that. Not to mention those two huge accidents that happened in our country. In order to do a good story, we have to be empathetic, and if we are, we get shaken up and then we can’t sleep for days. We work with people who are ill, who have lost their closest to them, it’s terrible... Our television station hasn’t offered any specific help with mental health nor any other protection” (#1);

“Yes, ‘the new normal’ is entirely abnormal, and in that sense, I think that we all carry or will carry psychological problems from this situation. The journalist profession is stressful as is, therefore a systematic help with mental health should likely be considered, especially in this kind of situations” (#4);

“The crisis impacts mental health and that’s reflected and felt. I found it very stressful to be reporting, especially at the start of the pandemic. Twelve hours a day I was occupied with reporting on everything, in order not to miss on anything. All that causes stress which is hard to get rid of. None of the journalists have been offered help with their mental and physical health” (#7).

It can be concluded that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the journalists was very big and noticeable and that additional education and support are needed so they can be more educated, prepared and trained for trauma reporting.

5.5. Positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the journalists' point of view

Apart from the inevitable negative aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this global health crisis also produced a few positive aspects, as referred to by some of the interviewed journalists. In general, these aspects go along the lines of how the specific living and working conditions during the pandemic have enabled “more time to go inwards, bigger focus on personal and collective health” (#2). Also, due to limited movement, social distancing, quarantines and the rest of the measures to prevent spreading the disease, one of the journalists says: “we focused more on our families, our close friends, because we weren't allowed to have a large social circle” (#9), which is to say that during the pandemic people were spending most of their time within the circle of their families and socialising was limited to either their families or a small number of people. In regard to the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the interviewed journalists pointed to the fact that a keen closeness was established during the pandemic, both with their family members and colleagues, and an important role in all this had the various means of communication available where they could be in contact and share information, images, supportive messages and such:

“We got closer, more connected, we were sending messages back and forth nonstop, shared more personal stuff. We organized meetings after working hours to socialise, celebrated birthdays, we recommended each other films, listened to music. Every positive news was shared, even during weekends. We were celebrating all our birthdays including our children's birthdays at work” (#10).

When it comes to the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the journalists' point of view, the general conclusion is that in the time of the pandemic, the people had more time for themselves and their families, opportunity to build closer relationships with their colleagues in terms of sharing more personal problems and to reconsider some of their life choices and plans.

6. Conclusions

Given the primary role of journalism, which is sharing accurate, credible, unbiased and easy to understand information, a general conclusion can be drawn from the interviews that journalists had to tackle a difficult challenge which impacted their mental and physical health.

For the goals of the research that takes the challenges faced by journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic as subject of interest, there are a few specific conclusions from the received and analysed data, which is to say, the following key challenges have been identified:

☞ changes to the way of work of journalists and media during the COVID-19 pandemic and reorganization of capacity;

- ☞ threatened mental and physical health of journalists;
- ☞ threatened socioeconomic situation of journalists;
- ☞ lack of relevant and credible sources of information;
- ☞ an influx of information, misinformation, half-truths and fake news;
- ☞ hate speech, stigmatization and discrimination;
- ☞ lack of transparency by relevant institutions and bodies
- ☞ lack of education and training of journalists on reporting during crisis.

Regarding the *general problems in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Macedonia from the journalists' point of view*, the following is important to be mentioned: inappropriate crisis and socioeconomic management, chaotic health management and insufficient hospital capacity, lack of experts and of unified stand and making political decisions from political interest. *The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the journalism and journalists in the Republic of Macedonia* is seen in the change of the working conditions in journalism and in the media and the change in journalism as a profession, also in the endangerment of the psychophysical health of journalists and in dealing with the infodemic and misinformation and fake news, i.e. in finding relevant and credible sources of information. *The individual risks and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic* include: work under much bigger pressure, a lot of stress, fear and anxiety, but also hate speech and discrimination from the public. It can be concluded that *the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the journalists* was even more significant due to the specificity of their profession and that additional education and support by the organizations/institutions are needed so they can be more prepared and trained for working and reporting in such conditions, having the right knowledge, tools and mechanisms for that. From *the journalists' point of view*, there are also *positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic* and they refer to the fact that people had more time for themselves and their families, time to dedicate to themselves and their loved ones, but also to get closer to colleagues and share much more with them, and to reconsider some of their decisions and attitudes.

The goal of the research was to shed light and identify the challenges faced by journalists in the Republic of Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the in-depth interviews with journalists contributed towards identifying all important aspects in as much detail as possible through the personal experiences of journalists faced with a global health crisis, but revealed many other aspects too, for example the positive aspects of the pandemic as well as problems, risks and challenges existing long before the global health crisis, but which have resurfaced with more force.

The journalists' personal experiences of their role during the pandemic showed that they have a strong sense of professional responsibility and duty to help the public by providing them with timely information that would serve to protect their health and their closest. In fact, their role in initiating, calling out and re-examining the responsibility of relevant state

institutions is notable, as is transmitting relevant sources (national and international) with opposing views.

Given the specific conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the specific nature of journalism as a profession, the interviews were carried out with a relatively small number of journalists, therefore the results are somewhat limited, but taking in mind the subject of interest and set goals of this research, the information received provide substantial data on the matter and lead to new insights and perspectives.

In this context, it is very important to point out that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface a lot of gaps in regard to the government treatment, the public and journalists and emphasized the need for systematic changes. Namely, the public's lack of confidence in the media and journalists was notable, the lack of education and training of journalists on reporting during crisis, the sensationalism and race for "clicks" by certain media, the absence of mechanisms by the authorities to deal with misinformation, fake news and hate speech, the non-transparency of relevant institutions and the lack of credible sources of information. All these aspects present very important topics for further research.

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