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THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF MEDIA REPORTING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Abstract

The media professionals, in their daily reporting, should be committed to respecting the human rights and the different cultural values. This obligation stems out of the doctrine for the social responsibility of the media. The nature of the profession comprises principles of conduct and specific rules that should be respected by the media workers. This set of ethical rules is known as a professional code of conduct, or journalistic canons that encompass media freedom, responsibility, independence (in every sense), reliability and trustworthiness. Most of the foreign influential media have developed and are governed by ethical codes or guidelines for reporting in specific situations. In Macedonia, however, the general impression is that most of the media, in their reporting, are not committed to the generally accepted ethical standards, which can be observed by the numerous examples of dominant reactive journalism, bipolar reporting and destruction of the journalistic ethics. One of the reasons for this situation is the absence of the written documents (codes of conduct and ethics) that would lead the journalists in their reporting. The only known document is the Code of Journalists of the Republic of Macedonia, but overall, its principles are not abided by the journalists. This paper, by considering the situation in thirty relevant media

in Macedonia, analyses the current situation and recommends further action taking into account the positive experiences of the influential world media. The recommendations and conclusions are aimed at developing ethical codes and principles for reporting in specific situations, as well as encouraging their full implementation in practice.

Key words: ethics, professional code, journalists, media

INTRODUCTION

In the modern societies, the perception of the reality largely depends on the public opinion, created and based on information presented by the journalists and the media. This is one of the reasons why the media have enormous power in today's world. If the media are silent about some event, or the media simply overlook it, it is basically the same as this event has not happened. The information placed in the media, the values they promote or the events they cover is perceived as very important in the everyday life. Hence, taking into consideration the great power of the media, their social responsibility is even greater. The basic rule of the journalistic profession envisages objective and balanced reporting, however it is understandable that the interpretation of the published information can be different. Ultimately, the best journalism would be the one in which all the journalists could publish everything. However, this kind of situation has rarely been achieved. Most of the reporters can witness that at least once in a life time they were not allowed to publish something that was worth to be heard by the public. That was result of various reasons: either they were prevented by the law, by some other authority (censorship) or they were simply afraid to responsibility for the possible consequences of publishing (self-censorship). In the Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopaedia (1985), the censorship is defined as "Supervision and control of the information and ideas that are circulated among the people within a society. In modern times, censorship refers to the examination of books, periodicals, plays, films, television and radio programs, news reports, and other communication media for the purpose of altering or suppressing parts thought to be objectionable or offensive" (Bram and Dickey, 1985). Chomsky and Herman (1994) argue that corporate ownership of news media very strongly encourages systematic self-censorship owing to market forces. In this argument, even with supposedly liberal media, bias and (often unconscious) self-censorship is evident in the selection and omission of news stories, and the framing of acceptable discussion, in line with the interests of the corporations owning those media.

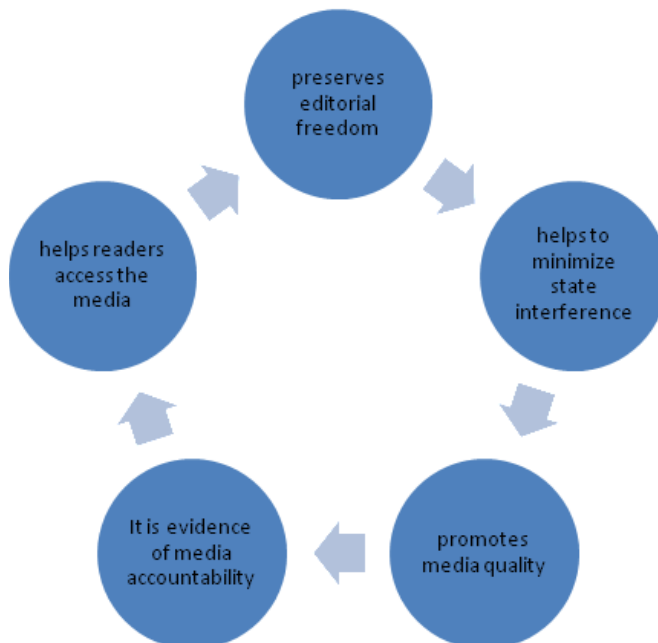
The modern societies, as mentioned above, tend to distance the state from interfering in the media and being their "owner" or "censor". The obligation of the media for objective, balanced and ethical reporting stems out of the doctrine for their social responsibility. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the journalists to "control" their work by themselves and in the same time, to jointly protect themselves from any kind of interfering in their professional work. The ethical codes of conduct as well as the media self-regulation have shown as a best concept for providing ethical, balanced and objective journalism. This concept should be

respected not only by the journalists themselves, but also by the media owners and the public in general.

THE NATURE OF MEDIA SELF-REGULATION

In the Handbook on Media self-regulation (Haraszti, 2008: 11), the concept of media self-regulation envisages “...joint endeavour by media professionals to set up voluntary editorial guidelines and abide by them in a learning process open to the public. By doing so, the independent media accept their share of responsibility for the quality of public discourse in the nation, while fully preserving their editorial autonomy in shaping it.” The authors of the handbook recognises the self-regulation as “establishing minimum principles on ethics, accuracy, personal rights and so on, while fully preserving editorial freedom on what to report and what opinions to express“ (Haraszti, 2008: 12).

Graph 1. *Five reasons for the media to develop media self-regulation*



Source: OSCE Handbook on media self-regulation (2008)

Media self-regulation has developed differently in different countries and therefore the forms of media self-regulation are not unique. Diversity is such that

in some countries the self-regulation occurs as response to the legal regulation of the media, while in other countries it was accepted that the self-regulatory bodies are established by the law. At present, journalists and their employers can apply a variety of methods for enforcing and implementing the self-regulation and the ethical behaviour. These include adhering to the codes of media ethics on one side, but also participation and supporting the work of the self-regulatory bodies, such as media ombudsman, press councils, press complaints commissions etc. According to Ethical Journalism Network, some of the self-regulatory bodies have a long tradition, such as the Press Council of Sweden, which has existed since 1916 and it is considered as a most successful model of Press Council in Europe. The British Council has developed in the period between 1947 and 1977, and the German Council was founded in 1956. Some of the media self-regulatory bodies have been established relatively recently, such as the Press Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, founded in 2000. Georgia established a media self-regulatory body in 2005 and Bulgaria in 2006. According to the list compiled by the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe, similar institutions are established in more than 50 countries worldwide, including 28 European countries. Some media outlets in the UK, like the newspapers The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent have established media ombudsman. Media ombudsman also functions in Spain (newspaper El Pais, La Vanguardia), France (newspaper Le Monde and in some electronic media) Denmark (newspaper Politiken), while in Sweden the Ombudsman institution was founded at the Press Council and not in the media outlet. Taking into consideration the above mentioned reasons, Kidder (2003:23) proposes using of three principles for resolving dilemmas, like:

- **Ends – Based thinking:** “Do what’s best for the greatest number of people.”
- **Rule – Based thinking:** “Follow your higher sense of principle.”
- **Care – Based thinking:** “Do what you want others to do“.

THE CODES OF ETHICS AS GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN THE JOURNALISTIC PROFESSION

The media codes of ethics define the functions, rights and duties of the media professionals and thus provide journalists with guiding principles on how to best exercise their profession. The names of these codes vary: ethics standards, ethics charter, code of conduct, code of practice, code of ethics, etc. However, according to Haraszti (2008: 23), they all have similar purposes: safeguarding the autonomy of the profession and serving the public interest.

The media ethical codes first appeared in the United States of America (USA), the country that besides the constitutional guarantee (first amendment to the US Constitution) has never brought a law on freedom of the press or information. Upon accepting the doctrine of “social responsibility”, the media owners started creating codes of professional ethics. Thus, at present there is no serious print or electronic medium in USA that has not developed an internal code of professional Conduct. All the journalists or other media professionals are obliged to get familiar with these codes, to confirm with signature that they have understood it and that they would apply it in their daily work.

Some of the codes are created for internal use in the newsrooms, while others are adopted by the professional associations of journalists and, in certain cases, by publishing organizations. Actually, the self-regulation systems in many European countries are based on the ethical codes. Only Luxembourg and Denmark have codes of ethics that have been adopted as legal instruments. In most of the European countries, the Code of Ethics is administered by the existing self-regulatory body (press commission, press council or similar). The main principles of the media codes of ethics are recognized and they lie in the nine principles of the International Federation of Journalists. Based on these principles, the Code of Journalists of Macedonia was adopted in 2001. The Code is consisted of principles and 17 articles and covers all major professional and ethical norms that need to be observed by the journalists. Beside this document, The Association of journalists of Macedonia has developed a Manual for Journalism Ethics, with an aim to promote ethical rules and media self-regulation.

Inspecting the codes of professional ethics that exist in the countries of Council of Europe, it can be concluded that all the provisions consisted in the media ethical codes should, in general, proclaim the following:

- Acceptance of responsibility

The media codes of ethics proclaim acceptance of responsibility by the media professionals to the public or to the audience. In that sense, the published information must be true, clear and unambiguous. As they are the main creators of the public opinion, the media professionals accept the obligation to respect and defend the rights of the citizens. Moreover, the codes require information from multiple sources. It is proclaimed that the sources of information should be reviewed and the news/ facts should be clearly separated from the comments. As Boeyink and Borden (2010) claim, “...there is nothing more to journalism ethics than doing journalism well. From all journalists is expected to do their jobs competently.” In that sense, a reporter “...should be able to find out information

efficiently and to know how to verify it so that he or she can vouch for the information's accuracy and completeness". According to Borden (2007) "... the practice of journalism deals with practical, rather than theoretical, expertise - one of the ways in which it differs from its intellectual cousin, science. The media professionals, indeed, will be the first to tell you that they make ethical decisions on a "case-by-case basis." In this regard, Cohen and Elliot (1997) note that the media professionals accept certain particular responsibilities by becoming journalists, entering news organizations and joining groups such as the societies of professional journalists. By becoming members of organizations, journalists agree to the promises that have been made on their behalf by these bodies. However, these principles are in constant tension as media professionals endeavour to perform good work - in both the technical and the moral sense. However, it needs to be pointed out that appealing to the code is not sufficient for solving the moral mysteries that bedevil even the best journalists. The moral issues require the media professionals to provide not only the facts but also the context surrounding them. Truthfulness as well as respecting the other ethical values entails a commitment not only from the journalist but also from the organization he or she works for.

- Protection of the professional integrity

Another area that affects the content of the codes of professional ethics is the protection of the professional integrity from external influences. Foremost, this means protection of the professional integrity from the government interference. At present, any government that threatens the freedom of journalists to access all sources of information is considered as uncivilized. The codes of professional ethics, on the other hand, promote this freedom. In the modern societies, the media professionals have the right to keep the "professional secrecy". In reality, this means that they are exempted from the obligation to disclose their sources of information. However, the freedom that is documented in the codes has boundaries, like for example; the journalists have to reveal their sources of information in front of the court under certain conditions. Given the fact that the number of privately owned media is increasing, the journalists try to incorporate in the codes their right to honest earnings and participation in making editorial decisions. The journalists also undertake the obligation to oppose the irregular media concentration, as well as to reject bribery, gifts and other privileges. In general, with accepting the codes of ethics, the media professionals are obliged to oppose any form of "novices' journalism" and "corrupted journalism."

- Responsibility towards the employer

The ethical codes promote the responsibility of the media professionals not only to the public but also towards their employer, which means respecting the agreed rules of behaviour in the workplace. Furthermore, it means that the media professionals should not use their position in order to gain material benefits. Bertrand (2003) believes that journalists have a greater responsibility to society, rather than their employers. He emphasizes that it is unethical for an editor to “kill” the story in exchange for a bribe or a higher position and offers “synthetic source” for the universal values, beginning with “fundamental values” of respect for life and solidarity between people.

- Responsibility towards the sources of information

It is quite logical that the codes of professional ethics journalists should define responsibility of the media professionals towards the sources of information. This area primarily requires “calming” of the public statements that may produce defamation or insult. However, the boundaries between the freedom of expression and the insult are very fluid. Crossing them may result with court cases, since moral satisfaction would be oftentimes insufficient. What journalists themselves can easily do is to respect the embargos for publishing information (by limiting the time for releasing the information to the public), respect the publishing and intellectual rights of other owners (prohibition of plagiarism and piracy) as well as to respect the right of the source to verify or correct its information. For example, the Society of Professional Journalist has adopted standards of truth, accuracy, conflicts of interest and respect. The US Public Relations Society has adopted a code of professional standards to guide its members through the moral norms of social responsibility. “Audiamur et altera pars- To hear the other side” is the first and foremost requirement of professional journalistic ethics. In that regard, irrespective of the true or false dilemma, an undeniable right of every source of information / interviewed person is to be able to adjust or completely withdraw the text. According to Bujega (2007), „The circumstances of ethical issues may vary, however the moral processes used to resolve them are basically the same“ Boeyink and Borden (2010) claim that “journalists can be skilful and yet fail to perform good work if they do not also do their jobs with moral excellence“. The respect for the dignity of others is expressed in prohibitions contained in many codes of professional ethics. For example, it is prohibited that the information gathering is done by dishonest means (without the consent of another person the journalists should not record images, voices, pictures, computer files etc.)

THE CONDITIONS IN MACEDONIA

Several self-regulation bodies exist in Macedonia, such as the Council of Ethics (founded in 2013). The Council bases its work on the principles of transparency and accountability and it freely promotes its views and opinions, takes initiatives and participates in building and upgrading of professional standards and ethics and their protection and promotion in the media in the country. The Council is a media self-regulatory body and functions in a way of applying moral sanctions on those media representatives who do not respect the professional standards. Another self-regulatory body in Macedonia is the Council of Honour that functions under the auspices of the Association of the Journalists of Macedonia. Its primary task is to look after and to promote the ethical principles, criteria and standards of profession stipulated in the Code of Journalists of Macedonia. The role of the Council of Honour is not to exert censorship or auto-censorship, but to set up and defend the principles of ethical, balanced and objective journalism.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

This paper applies an interdisciplinary methodology, combining primary research in the field with secondary desk research and remote consultations, as well as analysing qualitative and quantitative sources. In the period of January-April 2015, semi structured interviews were carried out with 40 journalists and editors in various media in Macedonia. In parallel, the media professionals were asked to response to a questionnaire in order to provide their opinion on the media ethics and functioning of the media self-regulatory bodies in R. Macedonia. The given answers were anonymous as requested by most of the respondents, with aim to provide honest and truthful answers. The authors understand that this sample size does not yield results that can be generalized to the overall media sector; however they believe that the conducted research provided insights that could be useful in analysing the current situation in Macedonia. In parallel, desk-based research on relevant literature, reports, official documents and statistics has been carried out, specifically in terms of analysing the content of the ethical codes and functioning of the self-regulation instruments worldwide, taking into account the relative reliability of different sources according to whether they were based on empirical research, official data, or other methods. Distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Profile of the respondents*

Editors/reporters in the Macedonian media	
TV	8
Radio	9
Newspaper	11
Online media	12
Total	40

According to the answers given by the interviewed editors and reporters in Macedonia, it can be observed that their perception about the effects of the self-regulatory instruments is imprecise. Although most of them are familiar with the functioning of the both self –regulatory bodies in the country, they are not fully confident about their effectiveness due to various reasons, such as the minor warnings/sanctions provided in case of breach of journalistic ethics.

Table 2. *Self-regulatory bodies in R. Macedonia*

Respondents	Yes fully	Yes partially	No	I don't know	
I am familiar with the work of the Council of ethics/ Council of Honour in R. Macedonia.	9	17	3	11	
I am familiar with the concept of the media ombudsman.	24	6	10	/	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think that the work of the self –regulatory bodies in R. Macedonia is effective and influences the daily work of the media professionals.	5	10	15	10	/
I think that establishing of other self-regulatory bodies will improve the communication with the public and the quality of the reporting.	31	3	6	/	/

The conducted semi- structured interviews with the media professionals show that the professional ethical reporting is disturbed by the following reasons:

- **Conflicts of interest** (while journalist is committed to telling the truth, the media owner is **interested** of certain distortion of the truth, since, for example, he/or she has some business interest by twisting the facts);
- **Influence of the advertisers** (many of the advertisers tend to be positively displayed in the media, disrespecting the real situation);
- **Sensationalism** (news organizations sometimes tend to emphasize the information that is interesting but unimportant. This happens when reporters put more effort into attracting and pleasing an audience than into reporting on the critical issues of the day);
- Oftentimes media publish **inappropriate/controversial** photographs or camera footage just to attract more clicks/visitors on the web (for example, killing of an animal due to a custom or similar).

The research has shown that there are many other reasons for breaching the journalistic ethics, like for example, sacrificing the quality of information for other lucrative aims. As stated by the interviewees, the media ethics is disturbed mostly by "...the political influence in the newsroom" (interviewed TV editor in Macedonia, 2015, personal communication), or "the determination of the journalists themselves to understand the profession as business, not respecting the ethical norms and values" (interviewed on line reporter in Macedonia, 2015, personal communication). All the respondents answered that they are familiar with the Code of Journalists of the R. Macedonia, however more than half of them answered that they are only partially familiar with its content and that they guide by their individual values when reporting. Several of them pointed out that they do not have a power to change the editorial policy even though they are aware that sometimes "the ethical boundaries are exceeded" (interviewed on line editor in Macedonia, 2015, personal communication). An alerting fact is that the majority of the respondents claimed that, for at least once in their career, were forced to disregard the professional ethics due to various reasons, explained in the interviews as "political/business influence to the editorial policy" (interviewed TV reporter in Macedonia, 2015, personal communication), "commercial motives" (interviewed radio editor in Macedonia, 2015, personal communication) or "need to attract the public" (interviewed radio reporter, 2015, personal communication).

Table 3. *Effectiveness of the Code of Ethics in R. Macedonia*

Respondents	Yes, fully	Yes, partially	No	I am not sure	
I am familiar with the Code of Journalists of R. Macedonia	18	22	/	/	
I respect the values of the Code of Journalists of R. Macedonia.	10	12	3	15	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The journalists are aware of the ethical professional standards.	27	5	8		
There is a need to raise the awareness among the media professionals about the ethical standards.	21	6	3	10	/
I was forced to disregard the professional standards at least once in my professional career.	18	14	/	4	4

In order to provide the public with high-quality information, many of the newsrooms worldwide have adopted their internal ethical codes or guidelines for reporting in specific situations. The BBC Editorial guidelines, for example, aim to give audiences content made to the highest editorial and ethical standards that proclaim balance of the presumption of freedom of expression with the responsibilities of the media professionals (to respect privacy, to be fair, to avoid unjustifiable offence and to provide appropriate protection for our audiences from harm).

The research conducted in Macedonia has shown that the information process is rarely guided by internal ethical codes or guidelines. Only three media representatives answered that they have created their own ethical code in the newsroom. The Macedonian Public broadcaster, Macedonian Radio television, in November 2015 has launched its code of ethics, which regulates the professional commitments, conflicts of interests, professional standards and ethical principles, releasing information on MRT's program, the rights, obligations and liabilities between the journalists and the editors-in-chief (Independent.mk. 2015).

Table 3. *Internal editorial rules and principles in the Macedonian media*

Respondents	Yes, fully	Yes, partially	No	I am not sure	
My newsroom has adopted internal editorial rules and principles.	3	/	31	6	
My newsroom has adopted internal editorial rules and principles for reporting on sensitive topics and specific situations.	/	/	33	7	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think that developing internal editorial rules and principles for reporting on sensitive topics/ specific situations will improve the quality of the reporting.	25	7	8	/	/

Furthermore, none of the responders answered that their newsroom has adopted some kind of editorial rules and principles that they follow in terms of reporting on sensitive topics. Most of them claim that they are consulting with their editors directly when reporting in specific situations (natural disasters, conflict situations). Furthermore, the majority of the interviewed media professionals in Macedonia claim that many of the ethical principles and commitments in the codes of ethics are disturbed in the cases where the material conditions for the work of the media and journalists are bad.

MAIN OBSERVATIONS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Considering the above mentioned issues, it can be concluded any democratic society needs independent journalism and objective and balanced media that will provide necessary objective and comprehensive information. Furthermore, the nature of the profession comprises principles of conduct and specific rules that should be respected by the media workers. Truth-telling is a strong moral imperative for the mission of journalism is to help the citizens to act responsibly in their communities. Ethics allows a choice at every stage, although each has sometimes faced with very limited options. Sometimes, personal responsibility of

the journalist can direct to the editor or refuse to go beyond what the editor expects from him.

In respect to the situation in Macedonia, it can be concluded that the media professionalism is going through difficult situation in the past couple of years. The media community in the country can be assessed as professional fragile, polarized and politicized, and journalism dispersed in temporary cover for other businesses. According to the research, the entire informative product by most of the media often contains information that is published based on the influence by personal attitudes of the editors or the media owners, but also contents that do not satisfy the general criteria for newsworthiness.

The existence of the ethical code (Code of Journalists), without applying certain mechanisms for its enforcement is not sufficient to ensure high professional standards in the media. Taking into consideration that the media professionals need to work in a strict accordance with the Code, this document should be used in a coordinated manner with the other self-regulatory instruments as well as with a consensus not only between the media professionals, but also with the media owners and the public included.

The media self-regulation in Macedonia, as the research showed, exists, however the effectiveness of the self-regulatory instruments is weak, based mostly on the published decisions of the Councils related to complaints about unethical behaviour of some media. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to expect that media owners or the political subjects would support and respect the internal codes of ethics or self-regulation mechanisms, without pressure from the side. In that sense, the most optimal model of self-regulation would be the mechanism to control the compliance with the code or self-regulatory body which would involve representatives of media professionals, publishers or owners and the public, because it would allow mutual supervision of the different actors involved in the process of information. This kind of self-regulatory instruments, shaped in a form of media response mechanisms, would ideally not permit to the any of the affected parties to be in a position dominate the work and decision making in informing the public. The public would be involved in the whole process in two ways: by membership in the media associations as well as by providing their input via the media ombudsman, which will act as a “public editor,” mediating he conflicts caused by external or internal pressures and encouraging the use of the professional and ethical standards as well as the self-criticism among the media professionals.

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