**“Watch your mouth”: Is there professional solidarity among journalists in BiH nowadays?**

***By: Vesna Iliktarević***

I have enrolled the faculty of journalism more than 25 years ago out of great love towards this profession, and I observed independent media as a pillar of each democratic society as well as the key of its progress. I looked at reporters with pencils and voice recorders in their hands as tireless fighters who promote greater human rights and protect the interests of the public.

I thought no one could harm them as they do their job.

We learned, among everything else, about five great questions, different genre, and the fact that there are two sides of every story during our student days. But now, after all these years I worked as a journalist, I came to realization that we never learned where was the journalist in this story, what is his place and how he or she should be acting in this contemporary society. We barely talk about solidarity among journalists.

This question is of a such essence, especially nowadays, that we should write many pages regarding the topic of solidarity among journalists. This profession is no longer respected as it used to be and, unfortunately, journalists and reporters all over the world got hurt only because their stories offended someone who was not at the same terms as the truth was.

**Solidarity should be in the main news**

During my first serious job at “Nezavisne novine” I confronted the fact that reporters and journalists made a lot of effort in showing readers different human stories, investigating corruption along with different malversation, bringing spectacular coverage, dealing with political actions that happen far from the eyes of the public. These are the reporters in BiH that are under numerous pressures and suffer with variety of physical and mental, along with verbal abuse. Many reporters can hear a threat “watch your mouth” during their careers.

20th anniversary of assassination of **Željko Kopanja**, publisher and founder of “Nezavisne novine” from Banjaluka, will happen this year, and the institutions never gave us the answer who was behind this terrible crime, nor were executors and commissioners of this act brought to justice. Many reporters and journalist associations still insist on revealing this crime and they warn us about increased number of attacks on reporters since then.

Attempted murder on our colleague **Vladimir Kovačević** happened last year, and there were attacks on other fellow journalists, physical and verbal abuse were present, threats, interceptions, and breaking into redaction offices…

Free Media Help Line, which was formed by BH Journalists Association, registered 48 cases of violation reporter’s rights and freedom of media only till the end of October 2019. It is a fact that many cases were not reported, and being a reporter nowadays is far from great.

It all comes down to a crucial question: If we, representatives of the seventh force, do not have empathy or solidarity for each other, how could we expect it from citizens, especially from representatives of the authority and Institutions, to realize the importance of our profession for democratic society, and how none ill-favored, not to mention threats, shouldn’t be aimed at the reporter who is doing his job in the most professional matter.

Is there any professional solidarity among the reporters in BiH? There is, but is, in most cases, so fragile, selective and not strong enough, and the reasons for that are numerous. We’re all responsible for this – reporters, associations, the whole system and society.

Observing this situation on everyday basis, solidarity is reduced to mutual help between journalists in offices, and there are fewer of them every day, exchanging contacts, taking tasks together, sometimes even expenses, talking about their position, listening each other about all those things that make their job even more difficult and coming to real answers and information.

However, concrete actions and reactions that would show those on power, and others who endanger journalists’ mission they can’t do so, are rare.

For example, on a rare occasion all news reporters abandon press conference if interlocutor insults or belittles some media representative or even that all journalists say that’s not OK out loud. These cases often end up in the form of a short news or at the very end of a TV broadcast.

Professional solidarity unfortunately culminates when a shocking attach had already happened and when it turns out, one more time, that journalists are not remotely protected in BiH. Then, professional solidarity becomes breaking news, and it should be the main news all the time.

In these moments journalists have the highest level of solidarity towards colleagues and they are the loudest when things such are physical attacks on their colleague already happen, or when it comes to death threat, when bullies break into newsrooms. Almost every journalist is alarmed then. They all go to protest, they put all their energy in keyboards and cameras, pay more attention one to another, help as much as they can.

It is pointed out once again that the attack on journalists is the attack to freedom of speech, freedom of media and our democratic values.

There are exceptions, for sure, when certain reporter or news agency gets silenced about a case because they think these things cannot happen to them, or even worse, that their colleagues even deserved it. Maybe even they cannot react due to certain interest or even a pressure made upon them.

But I really want to believe that those are rare and devastating exceptions.

That fierce solidarity wears down soon, not due to bad intentions, but due to the fact that journalists are more capable to fight for others and their position in society than to theirs, to run stories, jump from one task to another, and fight for mere existence…

The problems in journalism and cases with different kinds of pressure and threats were often left aside, and we shouldn’t allow it no more. Now is the right time to join forces and show who we are, that we – journalist exist and to put our profession on its place.

If journalists and Associations will not help reporters, if we don’t ask for the change of law regulations which will guarantee us protection, if we don’t fight for the prosperity of our profession every day, who else will do it for us? No one.

We, journalists, can show that, if no other method of protection works, we at least have skills and knowledge our profession gave us. We can use texts, news coverage and different media channels to demonstrate and protest. And Associations that assemble media representatives must be more accurate because every reaction counts. All those who do their job professionally, and are subject of public attack or underestimation, must be protected and given equal kind of support.

Altogether, no matter where in media we work, what is our nationality, do we work in private or public sector, which association we represent, what is our column, we must take care of each other and take solidarity into consideration, first of all with those journalists that are severely endangered due to following ethical and professional principles.

It is not important if the journalist works only a day or a decade, or which media he or she represents.

Strong professional solidarity is a strong mechanism for stopping the abuse towards our colleagues, stop avoiding answers to critical questions, and to stop arrogant humiliations during public events.

In situations like this all reporters, joined together, should support a colleague, if he or she does the job professionally. We should raise our voices against individuals or representatives that ruin the integrity of journalist profession and freedom of media.

**Restore the integrity of the profession**

Speaking of professional solidarity, we talk about media representative dignity, or respect towards professional standards and we should fight every day with the aim of empowerment of our colleagues so they never suffer pressure again and allow themselves to be just a stepping stone.

The fact is that integrity of journalist profession is endangered, so it is not a surprise that many young people who study journalism actually want something else. During my faculty education I had many great journalists as role models, and today it is not the case.

In one of my casual conversations with the students of journalism I found out that, after graduating they would like to be spokesmen and sit at an office from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Some of them said they consider journalists don’t make enough money, they have seen journalists being offended at press conferences, how they stand outdoors during rain or temperatures low up to -5 degrees Celsius, waiting for the political meeting to end in order to take a statement. They also said journalists have no working hours, how they know verbal and physical abuse happens every now and then and so on. It is for these young people that we must restore faith in journalist profession as an important role in our society.

The things that is still encouraging is that young people, as citizens, as shown by polls, didn’t lose their faith towards journalists that fight for the truth and stories that are in public interest, and regardless of small amounts of money and attempts of underestimating journalist profession, they contribute to democracy in this society by their ethical views towards this job, and are representatives of “ordinary” people.

All of us working in media should make an impact on Institutions with our joint activities and strong solidarity in order for them to resolve the attacks on journalists, start punishing those who disobey the law, and put closure to other issues related to journalist profession.

Solidarity among journalists still shines bright, but it shouldn’t flare up only when it happens that our colleague ends up covered in blood and fighting for his life. We ought to have strong professional solidarity in cases when journalist profession is about to be depreciated.

Strong solidarity among journalists along with proper work from Institutions, specific and detailed laws and their applications could be the way to protection of the freedom of the media and making an atmosphere where journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina will have normal work conditions, in the best interest of democratic society, country, and more importantly each citizen.

***(The author is an editor at “Nezavisne novine”; This article was created as part of a project implemented by the BH Journalists Association and the German Embassy in BiH)***