

Content

Events
Press releases
Media on media
Vacancies
Free media helpline

Free access to information – corona virus zero patient in BiH

By: Nedim Pobrić

Journalists have become victims of injustice in their fight for the rights of others

By: Slađan Tomić

A view from plundered editing office

By: Dario Lukić

“Respiratori” (Ventilators) affair outlined the media role during the state of emergency

By: Ervin Mušinić

Freedom of expression and COVID-19 in BiH

*By: Vanja Ibrahimbegović
Tihak*

Introduction

Journalism in times of COVID-19



Illustration/BH Journalists

Corona virus pandemics has changed the world that we know for good, so therefore it has accordingly changed the lives of both female and male journalists, including other media staff that have, for the past few months, encountered with numerous and rather difficult challenges in regard with professional journalism.

First and most important challenge was how to operate and perform as professional journalist during the pandemics, which included daily reporting from the field, including meetings with various guests in studios, or interviews at places concerning miscellaneous venues and events and the same time, since these journalists have tried to minimize infection risks for both, media representatives and their interviewees.

Masks, protection medical gloves, microphone protecting devices have all become a routine and a must equipment for all journalists, photo reporters and cameramen, because none of these would even dare to make a field trip without carrying any of the above listed equipment to work. TV studio guests and interviewees that would normally and under standard and regular circumstances be doing their interviews, have been “replaced” with Skype interviews with same guests. Additionally, conferences had to be followed “remotely” and with agenda (questions, discussions and topics) prepared in advance for all participants and many of us realized that, courtesy of modern technology, a lot of work could -

Events

03.04.2020.

[EFJ and European Commission: Countries must provide assistance and a recovery plan for the media outlets](#)

23.04.2020.

[The European Federation of Journalists proposes a Marshall Plan to help the media](#)

06.05.2020.

[Ombudsmen of BiH recommend to crisis staffs: Ensure maximum involvement of journalists in press conferences](#)

19.05.2020.

[BH Journalists started a program of free psychological support to media professionals](#)

Press releases

25.05.2020.

[BiH: Police to act promptly when journalists are threatened](#)

29.05.2020.

[BH Journalists: Condemnation of threats against Nikola Vučić, N1 TV journalist, for posting on Twitter](#)

02.06.2020.

[BH Journalists: Public protest to the Cantonal Board of SDA Sarajevo due to interference in the work of TVSA](#)

Media about the media

21.04.2020.

[Reporters Without Borders: Editorial policies reflecting ethnic divisions and hate speech more and more obvious in BiH](#)

11.05.2020.

[Persons who attacked Klix.ba and Al Jazeera Balkans reporters sentenced to six months probation each](#)

05.06.2020.

[Facebook starts labeling "state-controlled media" pages](#)

Vacancies

No open vacancies

have been done by staying and working from home with the same results as working from editing offices. Some of us, like our colleagues from Croatia went even further and launched interviews in their improvised studios set up in their homes, apartments and houses, where they thus managed to broadcast daily news programs.

Soon after first few weeks working under such working conditions and operating under state of emergency circumstances, it somewhat appeared that the fact that they had to put their lives under risk (in order to provide public with as timely and accurate information as possible, while, at the same time, most of public audience had been following what was happening safely and comfortably from their homes), female and male journalists displayed and demonstrated that they did not seem to see problems in regards with the fact that they had to work under such conditions. Rapid fall and decrease of commercial advertising and marketing incomes in media houses resulted in vast number of sacking, cancelation of contracts, and reduction of salaries all the way to "minimum" wages and so on and so forth. With quiet compassion with those that were left jobless, some female and male journalists in most BiH media houses began to consider them-selves lucky since they still had jobs – regardless to the fact that they had to work a lot more than ever before and at the same time, work for less money.

They have been working with many during the global crisis time, thus regaining faith that real and genuine investigative reporting has not faded away in BiH. Journalists managed to detect and discover (exposing cases to smallest details) numerous affairs concerning public procurement procedures and susceptible procedures included; they managed to discover and reveal controversial business deals concerning many corona virus profiteers, thus exposing many local politicians, ministers and public figures under the magnifier and attention of judiciary bodies Etc. Shortly, regardless to pandemics or perhaps in defiance of it, they managed to remain and sustain what they are meant to be – professional journalists.

Journalists and editors **Nedim Pobrić, Slađan Tomić, Dario Lukić, Ervin Mušinović, and Vanja Ibrahimbegović Tihak** (Council of Europe) shall cover the issue of journalism during the COVID-19 period in this E-journalist edition.

Maja Radević, E-journalist Bulletin editor

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"Local authorities and institutions have somehow failed to demonstrate and display full understanding of the concept of social distance. Most of them, in regard with recommendations about physical distance, somewhat managed to find a foundation to keep physical (and any associated) distance from media representatives. It seemed that some of them actually suspected that COVID-19 could be transmitted even via email"

Free access to information – corona virus zero patient in BiH

By: Nedim Pobrić

Establishing a conceived telephone communication with government official authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (which has an opportunity to be crowned by receiving required and necessary information), has always been a challenge for journalists even under regular, standard and normal circumstances. Sustaining this kind of communication, (with the same purpose) in an improvised home – based editing office, just at the moment when a child lost her or his most favorite toy (followed by children's tears bursting out of their eyes), while, on the other hand, local minister tends to explain that he is actually not in the mood to talk about imposed issue and topics, does indeed represent and display a unique professional experience.

This kind of harmony, recorded by voice recorders, recording kid's crying and minister's "don't ask me about that" and immediately followed by his "send email enquiry to this cute girl in my cabinet", is, according to previous experiences and witnessing of my workmates, a hymn of journalists' corporation during the corona virus pandemics time. Unfortunately, home – isolation and everything it carried along was not the only and most certainly not the biggest challenge that journalists have been facing and encountering in their quest for information.

„Social “distance from journalists

Local official authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and institutions have somehow failed to demonstrate and display full comprehension and understanding of the concept of social distance. Most of them, in regard with recommendations about physical distance, somewhat managed to find a foundation to keep physical (and any associated) distance from media representatives. It seemed that some of them actually suspected that COVID – 19 could be transmitted even via email correspondence, so therefore they definitely decided to keep away from eventual contamination by opening their inboxes, that is, email enquiries that may have contained unwanted and rather unpleasant content.

It is quite difficult and hard to find media house whose email enquiry was not ignored (at least once) during press conferences organized by the Federal Government officials and Federal institutions official representatives; or email enquiry which was cunningly avoided followed by statement that the people who should have replied and responded to questions asked were in fact neither competent nor authorized to provide required and necessary information. In this way, for instance, the explanations that the general manager of the Public Health Institution of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina had absolutely no knowledge about the controversial purchasing of medical ventilators) became a routine; moreover, no one from the officials (people that have been answering questions asked by media representatives) was meritorious and responsible for imposing some pointless restrictive measures and orders during the past period.

Free Media Help Line

Actual cases:

1. Vanja Stokić, editor-in-chief of E-trafika:

After posting a photo with two migrants, Vanja Stokić, editor-in-chief of the E-trafika portal, received a message on her Facebook profile from a person named Goran Živanović, in which he threatened to “decapitate” not only migrants, but also “all the pastors who welcome them.”

Police in Banja Luka arrested Zivanovic the next day. He was released after the hearing and the case was handed over to the Banja Luka District Prosecutor's Office for further proceedings.

2. Nikola Vučić, N1 TV journalist

Commenting on the news that the West Herzegovina Canton has declared itself a “corona-free zone”, N1 TV journalist Nikola Vučić sarcastically asked via Twitter whether the “fascism-free zone” would be declared soon. This was followed by numerous threats via social networks and portals and calls for violence with remarks that Vučić should be put “in Neretva or on a stake”, labeling Vučić as a “halal Serb”, and numerous other insulting messages against him and his family.

A number of media from Herzegovina published articles in which they spread hate speech against Vučić, but also members against members of his family.

Emerging of COVID – 19 epidemics with all its consequences, was not only misused and served as space for misusing public procurement purchasing; its appearance also served as a foundation for making a wall of silence between official authorities who should be obliged to provide accurate and true answers in the name of public and they must share them with public as well.

As far as personal experiences are concerned, during the period of last two months, I managed to keep very stable single – way communication with Zoran Tegeltija, chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Zoran Tegeltija and his associates took very seriously recommendations regarding the reducing of contacts to that extent that they even decided to ignore virtual email correspondence. Whether Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina would discuss the Framework of the Law on State Budget of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and international obligations of Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020 what will happen with the decision regarding the allocation and distribution of money granted by International Monetary Fund and finally why are there no regular meeting sessions of Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, are all just some of many paraphrased issues and question that still have no answers.

Few more institutions at state level and those from lower level proved themselves equally “efficient” in replying and responding to these questions. During rare moments, when some of them dared to pick up the phone and answer the call, the explanation about the disproportion on number of enquiries and insufficient number of employees that managed to get to work safely (as the cause for omission or delay of required answers) would emerge in return.



Illustration/BH Journalists

First days of pandemics confirmed that transparency of work by the institutions, including freedom of access to information and freedom of their flow would be victims of corona virus, but that would not be the case in BiH only. That is why reporters of freedom of expression and freedom in media, as part of United Nations, Inter – American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) and media freedom representative from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (namely, the OSCE) during the common statement issued on 19 March 2020, warned the government that it must be obliged to ensure and secure rights to access to information and necessity to induce efforts required for the protection of journalists' work.

“Journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency, particularly when it aims to inform the public of critical information and monitors government actions. We urge all governments to robustly implement their freedom of information laws to ensure that all individuals, especially journalists, have access to information”, was the joint statement.

Violation of media freedoms

According to information by the international organizations for media freedoms, from the beginning of the pandemics till 15 May this year, it has been reported over 80 cases of the violation of media freedoms, including threats and arresting of journalists, increased censure over media and limiting access to information.

There is no hope of containing this virus if people can't access accurate information. It is truly alarming to see how many governments are more interested in protecting their own reputations than in saving lives,” said Ashfaq Khalfan, Amnesty International's Director of Law and Policy, on May 3rd, during the World Press Freedom Day.

On 9 April and during the press release, BH Journalists warned about limited access and obstructed access to information at the Government and Emergency Staff of the Federation of BiH, including Emergency Staff and Sarajevo Canton Government that had, according to issued press release, been censoring information, leaving thus many journalists without two – way communication and comprehensive replies, responses or answers regarding the questions about corona virus.

Media in the whole world, including those in BiH, share great responsibility for accurate and adequate information they provide general public audience with. However, media are not the only link in the chain required for information sharing and providing them to public, so they cannot be held as the only side responsible should information arrive too late or if they never reach the public. Sanja Vulic, an MP and member of the SNSD (local political party), perhaps “does not feel -

responsible because someone out there is a journalist”, as she claimed during the interview where she was justifying the amount of money she has been receiving as an MP. However, she would have felt responsible or, to some extent, even guilty, if a journalist cannot work properly if she or he is denied from having access to information.



"Journalists in general, including me, often write about the violation of human and labor rights, while on the other hand and at the same time, we experience that violation ourselves. Although the truth is priceless, it often seems to be more expensive than a secure job and poor PR that presents unwanted and conflict-biased worker to his superiors."

Journalists have become victims of injustice in their fight for the rights of others

By: *Sladjan Tomić*

Dismissal. I once received it and once I had to dismiss a person. I should say it is equal, that is, 1:1 if looked at it from global perspective. However, faced with close reality, the difference is enormous.

The decision that I was redundant came into force a day after I had been informed that I would be sacked. When I decided to quit I informed my superiors a fortnight ahead. I have been thinking about it for weeks. It was a difficult decision, but crucial one, because it answered the question whether I had been ready to quit and abandon comfortable zone which contained what every public service broadcaster can provide, even including Federal Television.

Moving to TV1 on 1 June 2018 I lost one of my many identities – the identity of a student among other things.

I obtained my diploma and new job at the same time. At the time, smaller working environment meant more work and wider specter of issues that I was writing about and making reports. During the period of almost two years at TV1, I managed to become a recognized TV1 journalist, including the fact that I also imposed positive things and vibes to this TV house.

Civil protests, rebellion, political tensions, institutional averse

I was on air when I called RTL, a Croatian TV channel. In fact it was RTL Direct (to be more precise), and at the moment, I am advertising both the TV house and myself. Controversial laws on religious freedom additionally polarized Montenegrin society and local leader of Islamic Community of Montenegro gave no statements for months. He replied for the first time after I had called him and his statements for "O" channel (TV1) was not only broadcasted by Montenegrin TV houses, but it was also shared by many media houses in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Brassy and arrogant reply by Milorad Dodik (titled "Dodik told the journalist to wear yellow waistcoat"), after replying to my question why was he favoring talking publicly about ethnic issues (while the living standard by most of his people were at the same time very critical and poor), was widely shown throughout the region. Even certain German media houses wrote and posted about young and talented journalist from TV 1, Bosnian - based TV house.

And we all did wear yellow waistcoats, including journalists, presenters and cameramen. Yellow waistcoat was the response to arrogance and limitless degradation of professional journalism by the local political officials; namely political elite. Deutsche Welle posted the following „Are yellow waistcoats possible in BiH “. We already knew that that was an impossible thing that may happen, however the TV1 was supporting and backing up those that had actually tried to wear yellow -

waistcoats and launch protest on the streets, not neglecting what the other side would have to say in return.

We were following (from the very beginning) legal fights lead by Dragicevic and Memic family. I can say that I am indeed proud of my former workmates and management, because we did belong to a particular media group that had been supporting all those that were seeking their rights on streets, but also (not long ago), over 20 minutes of the central news program was taken by the news covering protests and similar issues in Banjaluka, Sarajevo, Tuzla Etc.

I have, for almost two years, been writing about political tensions, complete irresponsibility by governing official authorities, averse and loath by institutional representatives and other associated social discrepancies as well.

In time, my TV engagement expanded to both “Oslobodjenje”, a local printed media newspaper, as well as online media. Labor rights that governing official representatives have been trying to destroy, have been main focus of my work.

I have also been reporting about migrant crisis, war veterans, children with developmental problems, but also reporting about citizens that had decided to use their democratic rights in order to instigate and launch rebellions, rallies and public protests. My intention has always been to be equally good to all platforms, as far as “Oslobodjenje” group is concerned. I also underwent a mobile journalism training process and I somehow believe (and this is my personal opinion), that I was the best trainee.

Objectively speaking, after the training process, I went to the field and recorded a report by myself using only one item – my mobile phone. It was the first TV report recorded by a mobile phone worth not more than couple of hundred of marks (BAM, a local currency), rather than being recorded by expensive and professional TV camera. My reports become standard headlines and breaking news at “Oslobodjenje”, and I first broke the news and shared it with “Oslobodjenje”, covering the issue of several Chinese construction workers that had been staying in self-isolation premises at the construction site (nearby the town of Pocitelj). This was weeks before the public found about the first COVID – 19 infected person.

One of my last work tasks was reporting about first cases of infection in Banjaluka. A random female person, that had just returned from Germany (I later recorded her on my camera while I was conducting the poll amongst the public), had entered Bosnia and Herzegovina without getting orders to go for self-isolation in the first place! Because of this fact and because I was in close contact with this, obviously risky person, I had to put myself into self-isolation.

My workmates, those that decided to stay had to work longer and harder than ever before split into two groups. Namely, they had to work for days in a row and then they would rest for another five days, which was more or less the system that is still in use at present. They have been at risk on daily basis, because social distancing has been very questionable and, for most required releases and statements, they had to use Skype services, in order to protect themselves and the interviewees. Despite the fact that they had been at risk every single day, journalists in BiH have not received any type of help so far whatsoever, including mass testing as well.

All of the above mentioned does indeed represent and display a retrospective shape of my work and some sort of my personal resume. Results that followed the period of over two years make me very proud of myself and what I had been doing. I feel grateful for being able to work for two years without censorship. Journalists in general, including me, often write or post about the violation of human rights and labor rights, while on the other hand and at the same time, we experience the violation of both human and labor rights. Although the truth is priceless, it often seems to be more expensive than a secure job and poor and inadequate PR that presents unwanted and conflict-biased worker to his superiors.

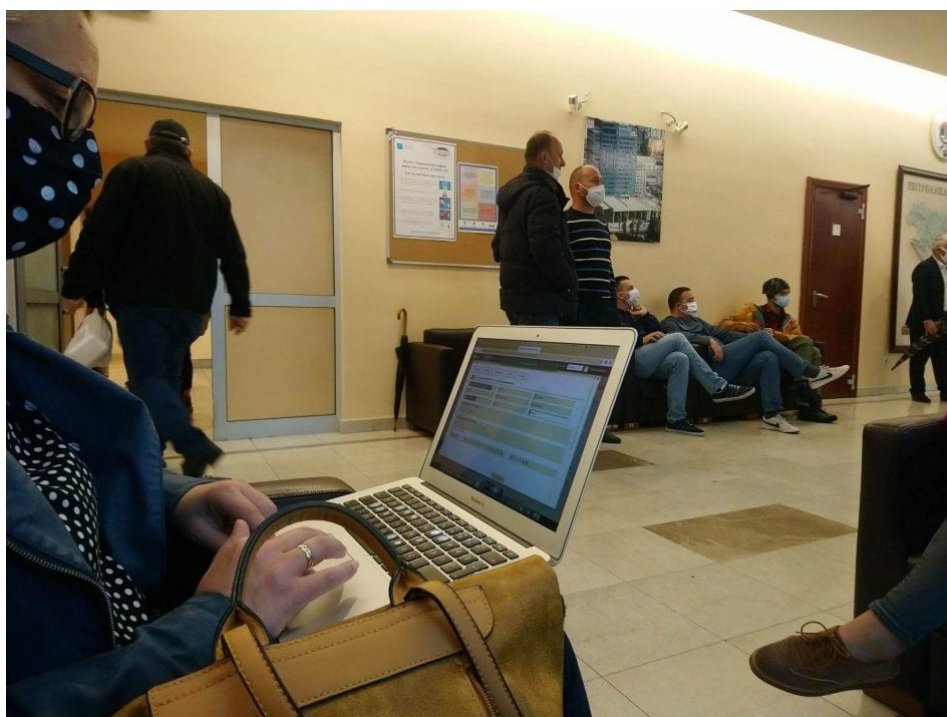
However, pink glasses should be worn by those who think that objectivity is their only virtue, including the respecting of ethic and follow the path of the truth. On one hand, the truth is often more rough than it appears, and on the other hand, it somehow seems untold.

Tens of employees, yet no one managed to determine accurate number of employees at “Oslobodjenje” (including the “O” TV Channel) that had been sacked or employees whose contracts expired. There have been tens of different profiles of journalists with some of them launching their careers and with some of them being close to retirement. Nevertheless, no one knew why they had been made redundant nor they were offered different and deficient positions in the same company. Dismissals at “Oslobodjenje” and “O” TV Channel represented a personification of poor situation, as far as professional journalism was concerned. We have never had official Union (Syndicate) representatives that would eventually support us and salaries in media field, although journalists do perform same jobs, are vastly different and vary from one journalist to another. Some journalists make minimum wages, while others make thousands.

Certain social activists with impeccable reputation have been underestimated and media and journalists have been tagged as crucial problem makers throughout social media sources.

The world is on hold, while journalism carries on

Perhaps no one can blame it on professional journalism, since we tend to neglect and often forget about personal truth during the fight for the truth of others and truth of our society. It is maybe because of the passion and devotion to professional journalism and our constant fight, aimed to prove and point out the injustice, where we sometimes ignore the injustice that we had been put through. Professional journalists “patrol” in areas where laws have been broken, yet we neglect the fact that media representatives often become victims of breaking the same laws. Female journalists get sacked when they get pregnant and on the other hand, many professional journalists have to work on honorary basis for years. The whole world has been put on hold for nearly two months, except for journalism. Economies undergo very difficult stages and journalists have been amongst the first to get sacked during this turbulent period. Professional journalists that continue with their work get more work to do, yet they get less paid, because of the fact that the scope of work they have to perform does not necessarily mean that they may get higher wages.



Illustration/BH Journalists

Employers justify sacking and downsizing their staff with the fact that their incomes have rapidly decreased, however journalism is not a type of production that brings solid profit.

Professional journalist cannot be considered as profit maker. Professional journalist is merely a person that genuinely represents citizens; she or he fights that the voice of people is heard loud and clear; she or he serves as a bound between politics and people and finally, professional journalist is destined and guided to promote and defend public interest, rather than making profit. Financial crisis caused by the pandemics cannot and must not serve as an excuse for neglecting notice period.

Social contributions (superannuation) were not paid under our names for almost a year and maybe it is just time that we leave on our own, that is, to quit. However, we remained seated and thus we have no right to complain.

Still, we have full right to ask ourselves, both professionally and morally, why, after months or even years of work, instead of bowing his head down, the person who had informed us that we were officially proclaimed redundant, have not enough dignity to at least tell us “Thank you for your devotion and cooperation”.



"A large number of journalists had real military guards during daily reporting from the field throughout BiH. Professionalism they demonstrated during difficult times has, once again, revealed all grace of this job as many colleagues have, most probably, discovered that genuine and primal feeling and reason why they in fact enjoy working as professional journalists."

A view from plundered editing office

By: Dario Lukić

An empty look on the street through the window, a cramp in the belly and felling of cold loneliness ... Momentarily silence consecutively interrupted by the sound of incoming Viber messages with questions such as: "What are going to do?", "Do we work at all?", "How are we going to overcome this situation because this will not end soon?", "If they close the borders and force a lockdown we are finished!", "Distributer is facing the end!",

"Marketing and commercial advertising is dead!", "We are sinking and going down!", "Are we coming to our editing office?", "We cannot survive this!", "We have no one to distribute our newspapers to – there are no people, everything is closed down, nothing works anymore..." "This is pointless", "We have to fight, and there is no other choice"...

The line of apocalypse, line of disappointment and feeling of hopelessness, line of adrenaline burst and line of confusion. Yes. And a lot of coffee desperately needed for "insomnia" during the moments when we should cautiously and attentively follow the situation on the field, including the development of events related to corona virus epidemics that had turned the world we knew upside down' the world that was, until the appearance of this, very invisible enemy, different by many means.

During the discussions with some workmates and colleagues from other editing offices, two identical phrases have been appearing all along: "This is a disaster!" and "May God help us!"

Nevertheless, few exchanged emails, messages or calls have all been more than welcomed in order to acquire needed and necessary calmness for, more or less; professional conduct related to the business that we do.

Journalists with „military guards”

Being a journalist during the corona virus times is not a happy solution. In quiet words of my colleague "there is a lot of unpaid contributions, plenty of discrepant contracts and many unpaid or partially paid wages and overtime", and, on the other hand, journalists have been exposed to many risks. Firstly, if you have been working on the field, you risk to get infected by an unknown infectious disease. Secondly, you are not sure if you will keep your job next day.

Thirdly, if you are lucky not to lose job, you are uncertain whether the media house you work for, that is, your employer, would be able to pay you, because media system has completely collapsed and closed from all sides. Fourthly, if you manage to avoid the scenario listed under numbers one, two or three, it is almost impossible to get paid according to what you had done (by most adequate and appropriate standards), during the turbulent time of pandemics.

Shortly, journalists have, during the pandemics period, worked a lot more than usual. Practically, they had to work non – stop for 24 hours, that is, from 12 a.m. till 12 p.m. for days or even for weeks. There is no money or salary than can pay out this kind of work and sarcastically speaking, this kind of work cannot be paid for.

It may sound strange, but my feeling is that a large number of journalists (both female and male) had real military guards during daily reporting from the field throughout BiH. Professionalism they displayed, demonstrated and showed during difficult times has, once again, revealed all grace of this professional trade and business, as many colleagues have, most probably, discovered that genuine and primal feeling and reason why they in fact enjoy working as professional journalists. Like real soldiers, they were ready to go to most dangerous places in order to share correct and accurate information with general public without any deviations whatsoever.

They were asking questions, served as powerful and strong corrective to governing official authorities, warning about errors, defaults, failures and problems as well. We could say that, along with medical staff, security forces and volunteers, journalists were the carriers in battle and fight against corona crisis.



Illustration/BH Journalists

Only a person that has never been doing this particular work would find the former statement difficult and hard to comprehend and utterly understand. Basically, journalists do not ask for special prize awards and believe me, they would most probably never get it regardless to what they do.

It is sometimes difficult to accept that fact, but it is just how it works in reality. Public often forget journalists' efforts and sacrifices, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As soon as the situation settles and calms down and as soon as our lives go on, more or less, to "normal" state, very few shall remember that it was the journalists that had managed to detect, reveal and expose the enormous crime and misuse of public money in one of the most controversial affairs in BiH ever; namely "The Ventilators" (original "Respiratori"). No one will then remember that journalists had constantly been putting governing official authorities under pressure, forcing them to some extent, to urgently pass required economy set of laws, desperately requested and aimed to save our economy and save thousands of jobs.

Many issues, regarding unnecessary violation of human rights during the pandemics period, shall also be forgotten about, including countless number of confessions by people that had been infected or endangered by this, rather venomous virus, followed additionally by endless interviews with doctors, epidemiologists and even constant and frequent attempt to search and quest required to find as most appropriate as possible solution to crisis we all have been in together.

We have indeed been struck hard

Unfortunately, this global fight against the corona virus resulted in devastation of media scene as well. Many of our colleagues lost their jobs, some of them were forced to leave since they had realized that there was no future for them in this particular business, wages and salaries were vastly reduced with only the increase of stress amongst the remaining journalists. Uncertainty has never abandoned us and no concrete and real help has arrived yet.

This is a special theme and issue in which I personally find many unclear situations. Although many institutions pledged their loyalty to social media importance and despite the fact that they have been tapping our shoulders all the time encouraging us thus to continue and carry on with our stories keeping up the good work at the same time (as we have always done), it seems amazing that not a single official authority showed herself or himself openly stating that she or he would want to help media out during this struggling situation, even offering help for journalists. It is unbelievable that highest ranked international community representatives failed to understand or they deliberately turned their eyes blind to the fact that media weakening would eventually result in a dictatorship!.

We are heading to an uncertainty where media may easily become so poor that they will eventually turn into political elite pamphlets and puppets and some already have. This situation, as far as censure and auto-censure is concerned, had already existed even before the pandemics. However, unless immediate actions are taken, the situation will definitely go from bad to significantly worse by all means! Perhaps I consider myself naïve and thus cannot understand “the plans” by the international community officials.

So much money has been directed into unclear and compromising projects (related to ruling elites), that I simply find very hard to digest and swallow enormous rejections to appeals required for necessary help and aid, during this turbulent and difficult period.

Will salvation save only those that will have to “take sides” and beg on their knees for help, writing in return fairy tales as requested, demanded or even ordered? Should we ask for permission every time we want to write something?

“Courage or insanity”, asked one of my colleagues from Sarajevo during the discussion about professional journalism. I would say that there is both, courage and insanity present in here. In fact, I believe that the latter is slightly more present than the former.

And yes, there is love for sure.

The sound of Viber message again...”Mate, what are you going to write about tomorrow”? There is hope after all.



"Journalists do not expect, (especially during the corona virus pandemic), to receive massive public recognition and applause because of what they do. However, on the other hand, they do expect mutual understanding and recognition that their work is indeed in public interest"

"Respiratori" (Ventilators) affair outlined the media role during the state of emergency

By: Ervin Mušinović

The consequences of Corona virus (COVID-19) in Bosnia and Herzegovina have had an impact on all services and trades including the field of journalism. Difficult and hard working conditions, rapid and vast decline of incomes (revenues), border lock – down system and inability to conduct trade and do business, have been some of many consequences that have had direct impact on media functioning, operating and business in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

During the moments of uncertainty, that is, during the period where the audience was provide (as ordinary citizens that have been living in fear) with; and during the time when official authority representatives that failed to provide precise answers in regard with public significant issues; the role of media in presenting audience with the truth gets wider context. Placed between mere providing of propaganda and critical overview of our system, most media houses in BiH have decided to choose the right way – the way of seeking the truth and providing objective information to public, as far as current affairs in the country were concerned.

The case of media reporting, covering the issue of purchasing of hundreds of ventilators, required for HealthCare system in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has perhaps best highlighted the above-mentioned thesis. If it were not for both, male and female journalists in our media community, including brave journalists such as Semira Degirmendžić, a professional female journalists that refused to provide public with only one and single information source (and biased); (that is, the propaganda), and if it weren't for the fact that this female journalist kept searching for precise, accurate and confirmed information (regarding the purchasing of ventilators by the Federal Department of Civilian Protection), this rather sensitive and controversial issue would most certainly never become a become a public headline and would not become the subject of judiciary bodies either.

Despite the fact that media journalists somehow managed to reach the information, (outlining clearly that the Federal Department of Civilian Protection had decided to award the fruit manufacturing company with the contract concerning the purchasing of medical ventilators), it would be necessary to widen our horizons and look at this issue from different perspective, as far as the search for required information is concerned, just as it normally happens in most democratic countries, since the issue itself is crucial information to the public. This happened during the Corona virus pandemic (COVID-19), but also during the non – transparent work by the governing official authorities.

At first, media demanded the information from the Federal Department of Civilian Protection regarding the information about the company, which had been awarded the contract for purchasing medical ventilators, because the purchase was completed and executed with public money

They remained silent. After that, we asked identical questions to both Federal Staff of Civilian Protection and Government of the Federation of BiH. Federal Staff of Civil Protection, as well as the Federal Department of Civilian Protection, while the Government of the Federation of BiH, went even further by announcing that this particular question should have been directed to the Federal Department of Civilian Protection. Federal Department of Civilian Protection, which had previously refused to reveal and release the information regarding the purchasing of ventilators! The question, whether the company that have been manufacturing fruits got BAM 10.0 million for the contract, and the Government of the Federation of BiH, by ignoring this sensitive issue, only confirmed that their previous statements that all questions raised by media representatives and directed to Public Relations Office of the Federal Government were not true at all.



Illustration/BH Journalists

The fact that none of the official authorities have decided to launch a legal investigation with the purpose of exposing those responsible (including thorough analysis of circumstances that have produced a large scale of non – transparent public bid purchasing processes) does indeed speak for itself. The above-mentioned fact only displayed how “concerned” the official authorities had (not) been in terms of discrepancies and malversations in the particular case for which, according to their own official statements, they had absolutely no knowledge. The question was who the officials that managed to hide the information from the Federal Prime Minister were, regarding journalists’ demands and enquires for information providing as far as the purchasing of ventilators was concerned.

If journalists’ attempts to find out about public purchasing procedures, issued by the Federal Department of Civilian Protection, had occurred during mid April in 2020, perhaps the Federal government authorities would have not found themselves in such awkward situation where they had to discuss the whole issue on 12 May 2020.

We should remind the readers that the Federal Department of Civilian Protection; (although they were not officially and legally authorized to do so) have attempted to guide and direct official prosecutors’ investigation into wrong direction. Namely, they (Federal Department of Civilian Protection) requested form official judiciary authorities -

to launch an investigation and discover which media house had first started releasing and revealing information regarding the purchasing of ventilators. This kind of imperious and arrogant conduct perhaps best illustrated the conduct by the official system representatives towards journalists (as important defenders of democratic values), particularly media houses that during this period have been considered, as most needed allies in fighting against the spreading of corona virus (pandemic of COVID-19).

Unfortunately, the role of media in our society has never been recognized and valued, as it should be. Journalists do not expect, (especially during the corona virus pandemic), to receive massive public recognition and applause because of what they do. However, on the other hand, they do expect mutual understanding and recognition that their work is indeed in public interest. Algorithms, where journalists follow the code of ethics on one hand, and where the government official authorities deny their right to free access to information (discrediting journalists at the same time) on the other hand, cannot serve as good path for future democratic perspective in BiH. Everyone should follow their own standards and principles, including codes and laws.

The forthcoming period shall outline to what extent the emerging of corona virus pandemic (COVID – 19) would have an impact on the economy of media houses in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is already evident that the media profits have rapidly declined because of a decreased number of commercial advertisers, so therefore many media houses began with downsizing by dismissing and sacking their own staff. All governing levels in BiH must accept the fact that one of their top and crucial priorities must be saving and preserving as many jobs as possible in all market trades. Saving as many jobs in media field as possible would be very necessary and desirable for democracy pathways (including entire society), because “the window to the world can be covered by a newspaper”.



“Should governing official authorities decide that certain information, considered as public importance, is hidden from the public, they must be certain that the damage and danger deriving from releasing such information is greater than omitting to release the same information and share it with the public”

Freedom of expression and COVID-19 in BiH

By: Vanja Ibrahimbegović Tihak

“Media must be free to report on all aspects of the crisis. Journalists have a key role and a special responsibility for providing timely, accurate and reliable information to the public. They must be able to scrutinize the decisions of authorities in response to the pandemic. Through responsible reporting, journalists can also help prevent panic from spreading and highlight positive examples of solidarity in our societies. I have been personally impressed and encouraged by the many media reports I have seen of citizens helping each other and of carers, nurses, doctors and other ‘heroes’ on the frontline of this crisis.” These were the words of Marija Pejčinović Burić, Council of Europe Secretary General, delivered on World Press Freedom Day ([Svjetski dan slobode medija](#)), during the peak of Corona virus pandemics. She reminded the audience about the fundamental principles of freedom of expression and demanded responsibility by both, Council of Europe State Members and media professionals, outlining that they should preserve and sustain their own professional standards, as well as to cherish human rights.

Abuse of Human Rights Convention

As short reminder, we should outline here that Article 10 of the Human Rights Convention ([Evropske konvencije o ljudskim pravima](#)), defined fundamental protection standards concerning the rights to freedom of expression, guaranteed to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And they are awarded and evolved through court practice by the European Court of Human Rights and through declarations, recommendations and guidelines issued by the Council of Europe, which again, derived from the very same applicable practice. During the past period, Guidelines on Media Reporting during the Crisis ([Smjernice o medijskom izvještavanju u vrijeme krize](#)) from 2007 have been reactivated and these are available in all three constitutional languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Guidelines clearly define that member states shall ensure and provide free access to information which is in public interest; they must not misuse crisis situation in order to, by any means applicable, limit both female and male media representatives to have free access to information (including, for instance, defamation charges); competent governing official authorities shall not discriminate, but instead they shall provide free access to information to all media representatives and they shall not limit freedom of expression in regard with Article 10.

In this context, it is important to have full comprehension and understanding of Article 10 where any limiting of freedom of expression, imposed by the governing official authorities, must be in proportion with threats to other rights or freedoms, which again is in conflict with freedom of expression. In simple terms, this means that should governing official authorities decide that certain information, considered as public importance, is hidden from the public (if this should occur during specific period of time and associated with the argument that it represents common good), they (governing official authorities) must be certain that the damage and danger deriving from releasing such information (at certain period of time), is greater than omitting to release the same information and share it with the public.

However, it does not mean that governing official authorities may randomly pass these kinds of decisions. There is specific and well – defined criteria based upon which those decisions are estimated and evaluated (test of proportionality) since they apply to every single individual case. What is important to highlight here is the fact that freedom of expression, in accordance with the Convention is the rule and limitations, represent exceptions that should be justified.

Some decisions passed by the governing official authorities, that is, institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the context of reducing the consequences of corona virus pandemics, demonstrated either fundamental ignorance of the above mentioned principles or they displayed a complete abuse. During the period when this particular article was written down, when one would believe that the pandemics was decreasing and declining, more and more analysis seem to have been appearing in public, confirming how BiH institutions, in their attempt and enormous effort and to repress pandemics, actually violated human rights ([analiza o tome kako su institucije BiH u pokušaju suzbijanja pandemije kršile ljudska prava](#)).

For instance, it is important to remind the audience about the decision passed by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina ([odluke Ustavnog suda Bosne i Hercegovine](#)), outlining that banning underage and senior citizens from leaving their homes did represent violation of human rights in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, because the conditions of proportionality had not been fully met. Namely, without taking weaker measure into consideration (for instance, partial restrictions respectively) that may have been equally efficient, and on the other hand, they would thus allow underage and senior citizens to have certain liberties, the Federal institutions instead decided to impose most strict restrictions immediately, where they completely ignored the rule of proportionality, which again clearly violated human rights.

Freedom of expression had been similarly violated. One of many cases supporting this thesis was the decision passed by the Government of the Republic of Srpska ([Odluka Vlade Republike Srpske](#)), concerning the ban on encouraging and instigating public panic and disorder on the territory of the Republic of Srpska during the state of emergency period. The decision banned *“revealing, releasing, exposing, posting or sharing false news or allegations that may cause panic or severely violate public peace and order or disallow or significantly disturb or obstruct the implementation of decisions and measures imposed by the governing official authorities and organizations executing public empowerments”*. From the protection of freedom of expression point of view, there is a whole line of problematic elements in this decision. For example, who would, in what way and how decide which “allegations” would result in mass public panic or *obstruct the decisions and measures implemented by the governing official authorities and public bodies*. This would indeed eventually leave a wide open space and area for the abuse and illegal limiting of the freedom of expression. After public reactions, including those by the BH Journalists ([BH novinara](#)), the Government of the Republic of Srpska, and a month after this controversial decision had been passed, put this decision out of force ([van snage](#)).

There were similar cases including those pursuant with the Provision passed by the President of the Republic of Srpska; including also the decision passed by the Emergency Staff of the Stari Grad Municipal official authorities, again concerning the ban of revealing, releasing, exposing, posting or sharing false news.

Pressure on media



Illustration/BH Journalists

Also, there were cases where the police ([policija oduzima snimke](#)), by using force, took video recordings from accredited journalists' team and delete them; or cases where medical institutions would openly favor particular media houses ([zdravstvena ustanova favorizira određene medije](#)) and particular journalists, while they would, at the same time, ban others from having free access to information that concerned public health situation or cases where Cantonal Emergency Staff, apparently due to the ban of social gatherings, disallowing thus public press conference ([kantonalni krizni štab pod krinkom zabrane okupljanja onemogućuje održavanje press konferencije](#)), that should contain information about epidemics and we all witnessed this occurrence in Bosnia and Herzegovina during first two months of corona virus crisis, since these were all in contrast with the principles and standards regarding the protection of freedom of expression, that, pursuant to European Convention of Human Rights. These principles must be obeyed by the state. In case of our country, and if we should judge by the above listed cases and examples, we could only conclude that this obligation had never been obeyed by the state officials as it should have been; instead pressure imposed on media representatives had at the same time become a raw model of conduct.

Without any intention to speculate the reasons of such conduct (displayed by the institution female and male representatives), whose primary goal was the protection of rights and liberties, the purpose of this article / text was to warn the general public audience about the standards of the Council of Europe and refer to their present / current practical application, all in accordance with the Constitution and laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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