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INFORMATION DISORDER IN MONTENEGRO: BRIEF ON THE ANALYSIS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH KEY INFORMANTS

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Information disorder: context, effects and consequences

Information disorder is complex and nuanced. It refers to the numerous ways that media ecosystem and information environment is “polluted”. It ranges from false and completely fabricated content to (increasingly used) mix of genuine, but out-of-context facts blended with falsehood¹.

The rise of disinformation and misinformation is not new, but the scale at which it infiltrates our daily lives, driven by social media, is unprecedented; the possibility of seemingly endless choices can leave many paralyzed in the ability to make informed decisions and recognize credible information.

There are psychological and social reasons that explain the impulses people have, which drive their behavior and habits with information. Noel Yuval Harari argues that **gossip** is one of the unheralded foundations of our species and its survival – he calls it the Cognitive revolution which separated us from other mammals. Wardle and Derakhshan² highlight that “*we need to understand the **ritualistic function of communication**. Rather than simply thinking about communication as the transmission of information from one person to another, we must recognize that communication plays a fundamental role in **representing shared beliefs**.” Numerous research show how people create **illusions and mental shortcuts** which are consequently hard to break, resulting in **belief echo chambers**. It is also highly relevant to understand who the most trustworthy sources are – research indicates the high ranking of **friends and family**.*

This social and emotional context is important as a frame for understanding why people are so susceptible to disinformation and misinformation, and how this context is used as a driver to effectively deliver disinformation campaigns. It is not ignorance – which is the absence of relevant knowledge. The effects of ignorance, actually, may be “less severe than those arising from reliance on misinformation³”.

In the region of Western Balkans, and in Montenegro, misinformation and disinformation have been a part of the media landscape for a very long time. Used at different times, for different purposes, this type of content is deepening political instability, conflict, divisions and polarization. Consequentially, many times people are not as interested in **news that will be balanced or informative as they are interested in information that will confirm existing attitudes**. As explained by one interviewed expert, “*When we talk about the disinformation, here is a key problem: that many of these media industries actually know very well who their target group is and what will sell certain information; **what they will sell will not be objectivity, balance or critical spirit - what will sell it will be the submission to already formed attitudes and especially ethnic and national passions**.*”

¹ <https://firstdraftnews.org/training/information-disorder/>

² <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>

³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100612451018>

Methodology and description of terminology

In this brief, the information disorder is considered to consist of the following three main elements:

- **Dis-information:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.
- **Mis-information:** Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- **Mal-information:** Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country⁴.

The analysis has been conducted through interviews with interlocutors from the media profession, academia, and individual experts.

⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>

Media landscape of Montenegro (summary of public opinion poll research)

When describing Montenegrin media scene, as a start, it is important to understand the audience – readers, viewers, and listeners– which are highly polarized: 78% see Montenegro as a divided society (based on opinion poll data conducted by CeSID in 2021)⁵. This is the context, the “arena” in which all the information is placed by the media.

The greatest proportion of those polled felt these divisions ran along ethnic lines (28%), and some saw party politics (22%) as the cause of the breach.

The reasons for these divisions are political, related to values, and rooted in history. A little over a third of Montenegrin citizens, 35%, believed the media incited divisions in Montenegro either ‘very much’ or ‘extremely’.

Disinformation in this context is part of the perpetuating circle – people feel more divided because they are served polarized information, and manipulated information deepens these divisions by playing on people’s attitudes and emotions.

There is awareness among the citizens about negative and harmful content in their media environment. Opinion poll data shows that 43% of them see opposition politicians as those who generate and promote it. To a lesser extent, a third of people sees the politicians in the government as generators and promoters of harmful content. A quarter of citizens see the media and the Serbian Orthodox Church as promoting negative and harmful content. When asked about Serbian media portals, about a third of the citizens considered them as promoting negative content.

In terms of habits, television is still the most dominant news source, for 45% of citizens, while websites and online portals are a primary source of information for 24% of citizens. Vijesti and public broadcaster RTCG are most commonly consumed media.

Disinformation in Montenegro: who, where, what, how and why

All interviewed interlocutors have a common attitude that disinformation and misinformation is omnipresent on Montenegrin media scene. Most of the interlocutors believe that disinformation is created for **political and/or financial gain**. They have also agreed that fake news (considered as completely false, incorrect and/or fabricated information) as a form of disinformation is **not** the most prevalent form of disinformation. It is more manipulated information - **a mix of truth and deceptive or false information** - which is more present and significantly more difficult to discern.

“What is happening in Montenegro, and in any other country of former Yugoslavia, reflects a bigger problem, our attitude towards information and what do we consider as disinformation and fake news - which is today a very popular term. Sometimes, the term fake news is used to describe fake news that are false, but the problem is something else – you will easily handle information which is obviously false, **the problem is more in media propaganda that uses selective information or intentionally chooses to keep secretive**

⁵ Poll was carried out for the project.

something, and highlight something else, to achieve a certain political agenda. And this is something that all politicians do today, and media is not immune to it as well.”

As a result of such information consumption, to some extent people are receiving not only distorted information but are creating a completely false sense of reality on which they base their decision-making. “When people don’t have correct and verified information, they cannot make informed decisions about their life”, as one of the interlocutors stated.

Politicians – whether in government or in opposition – are considered to be the main drivers of disinformation and misinformation. There is a symbiosis of politics and the media, which is not new nor exclusive to the Montenegro, and interlocutors see it, simply - as a “way of life”.

These relationships are created and maintained through political instrumentalization of the media, and are manifested through biased reporting, and even censorship (and self-censorship of journalists). The manipulated news pieces are always placed with some policy and in mind, whether it is to place false information or to hide some other news. “If somebody is placing fake news, they are doing it with an aim” one of the interlocutors concluded.

Several interlocutors explained two-folds of disinformation sources: one is social media, and the other are unregistered news portals that are in Montenegro, without impressum, and of unclear funding, leaning of certain political subjects and following their policy.

Additionally, it is visible that the relationship of the citizens with the media changed. The “classical” attitude which implied that the media will deliver impartial and objective information is almost abandoned. It is more common, the interviewed experts think, that the media function through agenda setting. Once there is an agenda, as interlocutor Davor Dzalto explained, “they (the media) search for interlocutors or information which will be in line with that agenda: We have our people, we have your people, we have enemies and we have friends; and this is the way the public space is entered, which creates a key problem for functioning of a democratic society, because you cannot rely on the media to be in the function of control of power levers in society and in the function for the public; they are **mostly in the function of private interests or some centres of power, and this is, of course, where religious organizations, political parties and corporate sector can be included.**”

Channels of distribution and aims of disinformation

Almost all interlocutors highlighted social media, and its significant role in spreading disinformation. It is a platform for fast dispersion of disinformation, that quickly reaches a wide audience, creating a virtual echo chamber of information and beliefs.

Even though not all social media is equally influential, such as Twitter which has significantly less reach and influence in Montenegro, the information posted can overspill to the media and reach wider audiences in that way.

“Media started to hide behind transferring information from the social media. Now, very often, there are texts where some politician published on Facebook or Twitter something that is essentially a lie, and the media

transferred this as an opinion, but the audience is reading this as someone's stance. In the next iteration, this lie from some argument on Twitter is news, and news became the truth."

Social media is used and misused, in the capacity to directly influence the outcome of events, place agendas, or escalate/deescalate certain situations.

Another channel some of the interlocutors mentioned are well-developed nets of party bot systems – people recruited by the parties to spread disinformation and hate speech narratives. However, not all interlocutors agree that this network is as strong and as influential, many think it is incidental, local, and specific to particular events.

Relations of politics and the media

Political bias in the media sector is seen as a "chronic problem". All the interviewed interlocutors agree that politicians have a significant impact on the editorial rooms of the media.

Large quantities of information are not matched with reliability and truth, in part because of the political instrumentalization of the media. Interlocutors agree that every party, whether in government or opposition, is searching for more spaces to realize their political goals. One of the interlocutors called this a **pre-democratic state, where political parties do not understand the importance of the free media**, but rather exercise their political desire to influence owners of some media. *"People in the media are aware of this and doing it purposefully. This is not the issue of ignorance, or coincidence, but a fully aware ambition"* one of the interlocutors states. In this way, media contributes to the divisions in society. Public interest is not always at the forefront of their agenda, and instead of being guardians of it, they are a means of manipulation, which, as a consequence, impacts the low level of democratic awareness among the people. *"The consciousness of the citizens is national, party and religious. Media are doing it on purpose, because of the interests of political elites. This sense of divisions is only suitable to political elites because it is the easiest way to manipulate the citizens"*.

Furthermore, it has an economic element to it, as explained by one of the experts: *"Economy on the Balkans is actually public sector. Over 40% of GDP is created in the public sector. That is almost half. Another 15, 20 or 30 percent of that GDP is created indirectly through the public sector. If you look at it like this, the state is two-thirds of everything, at least...If you want to do something here, sooner or later you hit into the state"*. Since the mechanisms that would control and suppress this are not existent or weak, this environment becomes a fertile land for exercising the power of influence.

It is very visible through the relationship of commercial entities, politics, and the media, especially through advertising. News pieces lacking critique of big advertisers are common; they are profiled in a positive light or hidden when involved in scandals or crisis. The financial gains are prevailing from the public interest, one interlocutor explained.

There is a part of (media) who know are aware of the harm they are doing with the proliferation of false, manipulative and negative content. *"They are enough intelligent, cynical, unscrupulous, and have no regard of the fact that they know what they are doing – placing disinformation and contributing to the tensions in the society – they do it simply because it brings profit"* one interlocutor explained.

Conclusions and recommendations

Communication is complex, it is value-based, beyond transmission of the message; “*People’s consumption of news and information is, first and foremost, a way to reaffirm their affinity with a larger dramatic narrative about the world and their place in it and transcends facts and figures*”⁶. It is helpful and necessary to explore interventions beyond education and debunking, that are urgent in developing responses to disinformation. While the work of fact-checkers is important, research shows that placing more factual information is not enough to combat internalized beliefs transmitted through the media.

Recommendations:

- Improving working conditions of journalists and direct support for their safety, security and wellbeing of editors and journalists: working conditions of journalists are difficult, especially from a psychological perspective. Supporting safety and security on different aspects would improve their working conditions. Three areas where such activities could take place are psychological safety, digital security and legal security.
- Support for piloting and testing solutions: experimenting with different solutions, different formats and evaluating the impact they have; connecting the academia and private sector (such as technology companies) with practitioners in the field.
- Support for education, as a long-term investment into critical thinking. Education initiatives should be accessible for all age groups. While schools are an obvious and primary place for learning, generations that have finished schooling rarely have the opportunity to be taught new skill in a format that is suitable for them.
- Exploring technological solutions: support for smaller groups or start-ups to design, test and innovate in this space is crucial.
- Support for local independent media and business model that connect them to the audiences. The connection to the audience is crucial – it builds on the awareness that it is important support the work of media which will confront them with information they may not necessarily agree with but know that it is important to be confronted with information that is different from their views.

⁶ <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>