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MEDIA ETHICS WITHIN THE FAKE NEWS CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Etyka mediów a fałszywe informacje podczas pandemii Covid-19

Abstract: *Every profession needs professional ethics, but some occupations, such as journalism, have special importance and a wide relationship with many people in society, so professional ethics is essential in this case. When the journalists income is at stake, what will their professional ethics be like? The Covid-19 pandemic 2020 is threatening the existence of journalism and the news. Journalists are having a hard time reporting on the pandemic. Between the issue of safety of the journalists, and the implementation of responsibility for reporting, journalists must put ethical issues at the top.*

This article analyzes the impact of fake news on the press and the ethical responsibility of journalists when reporting on the Covid-19 epidemic. Ethical behavior and social responsibility of journalists arise in professional journalism. A conflict may occur between professional obligations and basic human impulses of a journalist. They can fight to maintain their sense of fairness, balance, and objectivity. At the same time, they may be asked to lie. Their actions can cause real harm to the public, which in turn causes ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: *Media ethics, Press – Communication, Covid-19 pandemic, spreading fake news*

Abstrakt: *W wykonywaniu każdego zawodu należy kierować się zasadami etyki, jednak w niektórych profesjach, takich jak dziennikarstwo, wymagających szczególnej relacji ze społeczeństwem i poszczególnymi ludźmi, etyka zawodowa jest niezwykle ważna. Jaką postawę etyczną przyjmie dziennikarz w sytuacji, w której od jego postępowania będą zależały jego dochody? W tym roku pandemia Covid-19 zagraża istnieniu dziennikarstwa*

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i przepływowi informacji. Relacjonowanie wydarzeń związanych z pandemią nie jest łatwe. Kiedy w grę wchodzi bezpieczeństwo dziennikarzy, jak również odpowiedzialność za rzetelne przekazywanie informacji, stawianie etyki na pierwszym miejscu powinno być dla nich priorytetem.

W artykule autorzy analizują wpływ fałszywych informacji na prasę i odpowiedzialność moralną dziennikarzy relacjonujących wydarzenia związane z pandemią Covid-19. W profesjonalnym dziennikarstwie wzrasta zapotrzebowanie na etyczne postępowanie i występuje odpowiedzialność społeczna. Możliwy jest konflikt interesów pomiędzy zobowiązaniami zawodowymi, a podstawowymi ludzkimi odruchami. Z jednej strony toczy się walka o zachowanie poczucia sprawiedliwości, równowagi i obiektywności, z drugiej – nadchodzi polecenie z góry, aby zniekształcić prawdę. Twoje działania mogą naruszyć dobro publiczne i wywołać dylematy moralne.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka mediów, prasa – komunikacja, pandemia Covid-19, rozpowszechnianie fałszywych informacji, fake news

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) affirmed the Covid-19 pandemic as a potentially deadly fake news explosion worldwide. People around the world have died because of confusion with false and unproven information regarding Covid-19 treatment. The role of the press in fighting misinformation is vital (Neil 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the extraordinary amount of the news that journalists often have to manage and the pressures they face against the constant nature of breaking news. Journalists must realize that journalism is valuable in providing critical information to communities affected by the crisis.

However, the news publishers – print, digital, and online – in all countries are experiencing a series of financial issues that threaten their ability to survive the crisis. Newspapers are downsizing advertising revenue, as businesses affected by the crisis cut their advertising spending (Phuong 2020). This means that the media cannot benefit. Various events – an important source of both editorial input and revenue – have been canceled. For magazines and newspapers, access to printing facilities and distribution networks got more difficult, besides traffic is declining during the lockdown. Why is the risk the media currently encounter so high? How important is journalistic ethics during this challenging time?

1. General awareness of professional ethics

People live according to the social contract and formulate standards to regulate the behavior of the members and the whole community. Standards are drawn from real-life to help people distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, what to do from what not to do. This is called morality.

The more human society develops, the richer and more ethical it is considered to be. It means that morality always develops along with the development process of society.

In terms of social studies, morality is expressed by the specific attitude of public opinion (Jennings 2000: 56–57). These are opinions, states of appreciation, affirmation (positive) or criticism (negative) of many people of an individual or group's behavior and ideas. In terms of moral studies, ethics is considered a "court of conscience" capable of criticizing and judging one's behavior, attitude, and reasoning within everyone (Hadžialić 2019: 368).

Essentially, the adjustment of ethics occurs self-consciously and is the choice of each person. Ethics is enabled by conscience and criticism of the social opinion which advises and discourages people to choose for themselves. Each individual chooses from the set of common standards and rules and is responsible for translating those social-ethical requirements into his own needs, goals, and interests (Ministry of Information and Communications, Swedish Embassy in Vietnam (2010), *Manual of Press Ethics*, Hanoi, Vietnam.). This transformation manifests itself by the self-discipline to follow the rules and norms set by society. Therefore, in addition to it being expressed in social relationships, morality is also reflected in the attitude, behavior, and self-conduct of each person.

Professional ethics is a part of social morality which means ethics in a specific area of the general morality of society. Professional ethics include special ethical requirements, rules, and standards of a profession, to adjust the behavior of members of that profession in accordance with the interests and the social progress (Bugeja 2000: 15–17).

2. Journalism under the influence of fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic

The sheer volume of information on Covid-19 means that readers have to choose which source of the news and analyses to acknowledge and to trust. This can reinforce pre-existing biases and present greater challenges in the media context. Journalism is competitive, but the consensus in the industry and professional cooperation are critical to countering the global information crisis.

The duty of the press is to serve the general public. The media put the public interest ahead of commercial, political, and personal interests. The press empowers viewers, listeners, and readers to make smarter decisions for themselves; it does not tell people how to believe or feel.

Recently in Vietnam, the synchronous and intense participation of the authorities from the central to local levels allowed to efficiently control the spread of the epidemic, which minimized the losses. It was recognized and appreciated by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Ha 2020). Through information, propaganda, and mobilization of people to raise their awareness of self-protection and community protection to comply with law and guidance of the National Steering Committee on Covid-19 prevention and control, Ministry of Health and local government³ achieved initial successes.

The Covid-19 epidemic has been spreading around the world, and the misinformation about it has spread similarly. On social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, there has been a series of reports that the new strain of the coronavirus has been “fabricated” at a secret laboratory in Wuhan, the alleged focus of the Covid-19 epidemic. Following are the “miraculous” drugs, from gels, pills, or powders that can knock away the SARS-CoV-2 virus immediately. Misinformation about the Covid-19 epidemic is rampant around the world, despite the efforts of social networking companies to stop it. In Vietnam, during the Covid-19 epidemic, the problem of fake news on social networks also broke out and caused many negative effects (Warner, Cirelli 2020).

Along with the persistent battle against the Covid-19 epidemic, the battle against the waves of fake news is equally challenging. On this front,

³ *The Ministry of Health of Vietnam*, an updated source of information on the number of cases and how to prevent and fight diseases, from January to April 2020.

journalists have just burst into the “hot spot” of the pandemic, while using their photos, videos, and articles as anti-Fake News weapons.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned that fake information surrounding the outbreak of a new respiratory infection is undermining the fight against viruses. Also, WHO is fighting not only the disease but also the spread of fake news, which in many cases is even faster and has more serious consequences than the raging coronavirus (Bounegru, Gray, Venturini, Mauri 2018).

Journalists are placed in a central position in the persistent battle with the fake news that confuses public opinion, and their task is to regulate the flow of information (Paris, Donovan 2019). Recently, along with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the community, the spread of “fake news virus” is also taking place, and it is extremely fast, leading to collective panic attacks and negative actions.

However, not all false information is treated in the same way. After all, the circulating lies are a different story. In fact, some rumors might be valuable to journalists. Instead of treating rumors as misunderstandings that need to be corrected with accurate information, we should treat them as the feedback we can use to help improve reporting and, in turn, to reduce the public fear.

One of the most potentially dangerous consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is the prospect of eroding audiences’ confidence in all the press because they find telling the truth from the lies more difficult. A piece of false information can cause negative psychological effects on a large scale. Fake news without proper control and intervention can even disrupt a large community. Fake news outbreak is likely to have a much greater negative impact than the nature of the incident.

In the fight against fake news, every correspondent needs to fulfill his or her main mission. Every journalist must identify the core task of reporting and correcting information for the public. The more accurate the information, the less fake news.

3. The media ethics within the press about pandemics

Newspapers are distinguished from other forms of information transfer by putting principles of truth and accuracy first. Ethical journalism

requires detecting errors and timely correction of errors. In the press, content is collected, selected, and produced in the best interest of the public (Hoang 2013).

Media ethics applies at every step of the publishing process, including story selection, newsgathering, production, presentation, and publication. The code of ethics does not stipulate how journalists should act in all ethical situations; instead, it provides resources to help journalists make better ethical decisions – in and out of work – for themselves and the communities they serve (Hadžialić 2019: 368). Ethical principles help journalists perform their roles on a satisfactory level.

Firstly, the principle of qualifications and professional competence: This is the principle to ensure that journalists fulfill their tasks in professional activities. The moral standard of journalists is to constantly strive to learn and practice to improve the level of knowledge, accumulate experience, and promote professional skills and creativity in professional activities.

Secondly, the principle of personal ethics: Personal ethics is the basis for journalists to build and practice professional ethics. Professional ethics require basic human impulses from a journalist. It means one needs to know how to live well (for oneself, family and society), to have compassion for people, restraint on animalistic instincts, how to fight against evil and constantly cultivate and train to supplement other personal qualities such as kindness, patriotism, filial piety, honesty, sincerity, loyalty, need, thrift, integrity, fair-willingness, etc. Those qualities are the foundation to build and improve the professional ethics of every journalist.

Thirdly, the principle of work efficiency: The work results are a measure of the moral quality of journalists. Particular attention must be paid to the social effectiveness of professional activities and the effectiveness of journalistic works created by journalists. It is not possible to say that a journalist is ethical when the journalist does not fulfill the task of creating a journalistic work and when it is not beneficial to society.

The press accepts responsibility, clarifies its reasoning, and keeps its processes open for public review. For the press, being responsible also means paying attention to the consequences of both the information gathering – even if the information is never made public – and the potential dissemination of the document. The press has to pursue the truth and to report the news.

Professional journalists have a personal responsibility to reach out to individual people and the general public, generally, towards their

accurate source of information. Accuracy of news means all events have been checked, validated, and analyzed (Giang 2011).

Ethical behavior and social responsibility of journalists arise in professional journalism. A conflict may occur between professional obligations and basic human impulses of a journalist. They can fight to maintain their sense of fairness, balance, and objectivity. At the same time, they may be asked to lie. Their actions can cause real harm to the public, which in turn causes ethical dilemmas.

Professional journalism promotes the concept of ethical work for the public good, highlighting the central role of responsible journalism in society (Pritchard 2000). The ethical rules and the editorial policies and guidelines of the media and particularly the press, are an important contribution to the prosperity of society by promoting an atmosphere of tolerance and building understanding culture among different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups in society.

The ethical challenge is to develop social media guidelines that allow journalists to explore the new media but also set reasonable limits on personal commentary.

Social networking is a bridge for journalists to bring mainstream journalism works closer to readers. However, the implications of “fake news” is still a challenge if journalists are not alert and do not know how to select and verify the information (Paris, Donovan 2019). Therefore, under the pressure of information competition when an incident is updated on social networks, many reporters use it as a source of precious information and turn it into “their own”. They “stir-fry” it and “add seasoning” to write articles based on it, reporting as if they were witnesses present at the scene. Everybody knows that such actions violate journalistic ethics, yet it still happens. This prevalent practice of unleashing unchecked information undermines the trust of readers and greatly affected the true journalism. That is even more significant in the complicated situation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the number of newspapers and websites is getting bigger and bigger, the outcome of the battle for “rice-clothes and rice money” is represented in the number of viewers and it produces “salon journalists”. Currently, not many journalists produce news articles such as “chickens lay eggs” and use the pen to make “fishing rods” (Scott 2020).

Nothing compares to recent events of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the unprecedented scale of the news, as well as the requirements

for press and journalists. As Covid-19 spread, a high level of anxiety was caused by the confusion, what we knew and did not know who and what to trust, and how to stay safe – physically and mentally. Press agencies should focus on trying to find solutions and sharing information to help keep media colleagues safe and support them in doing their jobs responsibly (Lan 2020).

4. Challenges and responsibilities of journalists in the Covid-19 pandemic

4.1. Journalists with the public

Journalists and the public's relationship is an interconnected one in the professional ethical acts of journalists. It can be considered as a special relationship – a kinship-like relationship, meaningful in the modern press.

A newspaper or a journalist who is not welcomed and trusted by the public is the biggest failure. Without readers, a newspaper has no funds to afford print and to live by. Journalists and readers cannot be separated. Journalists must be respected by readers, which is obvious (Dung N.V. 2012).

While performing the task of providing information, to fully satisfy the aspirations, needs, and interests of the public, journalists need to face a series of ethical questions (Hoang 2013). That is: Is this information useful to the public? Is it correct? Does it report the news objectively, honestly? Does the public need this work? Does the work meet their needs and desires? Will the public take time to get to know this information? Will they read it carefully, look it over or not pay attention to what is in the article?

Not only that but taking into consideration the effectiveness of the information is also a journalist's ethical responsibility to the public. When writing, the journalist must answer a series of questions, such as: does the public understand the true nature of the incident and what is mentioned in the work? After receiving the information, how will the public change their perception, attitude, and behavior? Will they be angry, happy, or sad? Therefore, journalists must seriously consider and

fully analyze every aspect of the case to provide the best information to the public.

Thus, the journalist's moral obligation to the public not only lies in the duty to provide accurate information but also in anticipating the consequences of such news. The journalist must do his or her best on two levels. The first level is that before a work is published, journalists must be aware of their obligation to provide genuine information and consider the impact of that information (Mulcahey 2020). The second level is that after the publication of the work, the journalist must be willing to take responsibility for the accuracy of the work and the consequences it has brought to the public.

Awareness of journalists concerning the public also varies. Some people think that their audience is a large entity, with various occupations and of many ages. The others are inclined to the public audience who is interested in paradoxical, sensational, and scary stories, and in highlighting the dark side of society.

4.2. Protection of news sources is of role vital to journalists

When news happens, journalists need to react, provide evidence, or quickly explain information to readers. Journalists immediately need to find out somebody who will provide reliable and accurate information to them (Hoa 2012). This is considered a vital relation, because in a sense if there is no source, the journalist will have no information to provide to the public. Finding the best way to deal with falsehood and misinformation in this pandemic is one of the many difficult tasks of journalists and publishers.

There are three types of sources: (1) documents, (2) environment (or scene), (3) people. When it comes to the ethical relationship between journalists and sources, it refers to the relationship between journalists and the third type of source – people. Besides the provisions of law, this relationship is regulated by the code of professional ethics. The Code of Ethics sets the standards for journalists on exposing, collecting, and using information and documents provided by sources.

There are two ways journalists encounter sources (Anh 2020). The first is to openly present oneself and one's purpose as a representative for the media to collect information; The second is to act in the disguise of, for instance, salesmen, drivers, etc. to discreetly observe and collect

information. But either way, journalists must follow professional ethical standards when interacting with sources.

In the first case, the journalist must have a polite attitude when introducing himself and his purpose to successfully enlist the support of the source. Journalists must not use measures like threats or pressure to force news sources to provide information or have an attitude of disregarding their aspirations, interests, and views. Journalists need to persuade the news source to voluntarily talk and provide information⁴.

In the second case, journalists must be in disguise, discreetly observing the incident. There are two main motivations of approaching the source. In the first of them, a journalist wants to see and evaluate things from within, when the public appearance of the journalist can disturb the order or stir the inherent honesty and change the attitude and behavior of people around⁵. The second motivation is when a journalist wants to collect information and data that are intentionally concealed. It should only be used in cases where journalists have clear evidence of threats to the stability of society. In this situation, journalists cannot use public cameras, and audio recorders must be concealed. Of course, this is very difficult and dangerous work (Giang 2011).

When using information gathered from sources, journalists also face a series of ethical issues. The consent of the source may be difficult to obtain due to their unkindness or unforeseen negative consequences (Robertson 2001: 20–29). Therefore, journalists must handle it carefully, basing on the principle of respecting the rights of information providers, and if they agree, journalists are responsible for fulfilling those commitments. Journalists must protect the source of information and keep the information provider secret.

4.3. A journalist and a character in his/her press product

When writing and preparing to publish an article, a journalist must pay attention to the moral relationship with the character in his work. The characters in press works are real people, so journalists need to

⁴ *The Ministry of Health of Vietnam*, an updated source of information on the number of cases and how to prevent and fight diseases, from January to April 2020.

⁵ *Vietnam Journalists Association*, a source of information on the prevention of the Covid-19 epidemic, from January to April 2020.

consider carefully what information should be given, and what should not. Journalists must ask themselves some questions, like: would writing like this affect the lives, interests, and dignity of the people described? Would putting this photo or this detail be harmful to the character? Would announcing this relationship complicate the everyday life of the people described? Would the public understand those characters?

Although an adult person should be aware of the importance of posting and authorizing the publication, it is the journalist who has to consider the extent of damage that could have happened to his character, and in many cases, only the journalists are aware of the potential dangers.

Ethical requirements demand that journalists consider the implications of the two concepts of “social interest” and “public interest”. Things that the public cares for do not necessarily bring benefits to society. For example, bad habits and the exploitation of a person’s private life probably do not serve the common good of society.

With Covid-19, the situation is changing so fast that journalists and news organizations constantly update the instructions of their respective governments and authorities. Journalists should always know their health condition, and if they experience any symptoms of the virus, they must notify their employer and follow the policy of the country or government where they are working⁶. Journalists need to be self-sufficient in such situations and make sure they are not dependent on the services or supplies of the affected communities.

It is said that social media negatively affect journalists’ morals. Technologically speaking, every person can be a journalist because all it takes is to own a smartphone. Social networking negatively affects only the people lacking bravery and those less professional. Therefore, it is not easy to blame social media for this. Instead, care should be taken to maintain professional ethics.

When a pandemic occurs, reporters must enter the epidemic area to record and reflect epidemics, treatment areas, and isolation areas – sites with a high infection potential. When the problem of rumors spread causes confusion, this is the journalists’ role to actively gather the most accurate, objective, and transparent information to “dislodge” fake news (Scott 2020). Journalists have helped people keep confidence in the government’s

⁶ *The Ministry of Health of Vietnam*, an updated source of information on the number of cases and how to prevent and fight diseases, from January to April 2020.

anti-epidemic management and enabled their compliance with the regulations. Without passion, commitment, and responsibility to the profession and society, journalists will surely not be able to write firmly in this complicated time.

Conclusions

In the trend of strong integration, the pressure to compete for information from social networks has created both opportunities and challenges for journalists. It shows that the greater the role of journalists in the digital age, the more journalist's morality needs to be focused. If journalists just chased the news and forgot their social responsibilities, they would lose themselves and get rejected. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the extraordinary amount of the news that journalists have to manage, and almost the same amount of the pressures they face. Journalists must realize that journalism is essential in providing critical information to communities affected by the crisis.

In particular, journalists need to keep on mind the core principles of journalistic ethics during the Covid-19 pandemic: First of all, values like truth and accuracy, fairness and impartiality, humanity, responsibility, and independence; avoiding sensationalism in language and pictures that can increase anxiety (for example, images of empty supermarket shelves – which may cause stress and outright panic); making sure they protect the affected people; not revealing names, images or identifying documents without the permission of the people involved; being accurate and reporting the truth; avoiding rumors and trying not to speculate.

Facing the problem of fake, toxic news requires the press to be cautious, verified, responsible for appraising before bringing products to “consumers”. Professional journalists, dedicated to the foundation of the ethical approach in their work, will always be on the side of an accurate and balanced story. That is because the core of journalism is social orientation, humanity, and the pursuit of “truth – good – beauty”.

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