

SENSATIONALISM'S IMPACT ON MEDIA ETHICS

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Summary: The paper examines the impact of disinformation and clickbait in journalism, focusing on the tragic shooting at “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School in Belgrade. It explores how sensational reporting affects society, ethics, and the media landscape, emphasizing the crucial role of ethical journalism in shaping public opinion. In the digital age, media outlets face pressure to attract audiences, often leading to a decline in ethical standards. Clickbait, with its misleading headlines, and disinformation, which spreads false information, are major challenges undermining public trust. The case study of the Belgrade shooting demonstrates how irresponsible reporting can exacerbate tragedies, harm victims, and mislead the public. The paper stresses the need for ethical journalism that prioritizes accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility, particularly in crisis situations. It also calls for better public education to identify sensationalist and fake news, aiming to restore trust in the media. Through analysis of specific examples, the study offers recommendations for minimizing disinformation and clickbait, advocating for a return to journalistic principles that serve the public interest.

Key words: *disinformation, clickbait, ethical journalism, media trust, sensationalism*

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УТИЦАЈ СЕНЗАЦИОНАЛИЗМА НА МЕДИЈСКУ ЕТИКУ

Резиме: У раду се испитује утицај дезинформација и кликбајта у новинарству, са фокусом на трагичну пуцњаву у Основној школи „Владислав Рибникар“ у Београду. Истражује се како сензационалистичко извештавање утиче на друштво, етику и медијски пејзаж, наглашавајући кључну улогу етичког новинарства у обликовању јавног мњења. У дигиталном добу, медији се суочавају са притиском да привуку публику, што често доводи до пада етичких стандарда. Мамац за кликове, са својим обмањујућим насловима и дезинформацијама, које шире лажне информације, представљају велики изазов који подрива поверење јавности. Студија случаја пуцњаве у Београду показује како неодговорно извештавање може погоршати трагедије, нанети штету жртвама и обманути јавност. Рад наглашава потребу за етичким новинарством које даје предност тачности, непристрасности и одговорности, посебно у кризним ситуацијама. Такође позива на боље образовање јавности како би се идентификовале сензационалистичке и лажне вести, са циљем да се врати поверење у медије. Кроз анализу конкретних примера, студија нуди препоруке за минимизирање дезинформација и мамца за кликове, залажући се за повратак новинарским принципима који служе јавном интересу. Кључне речи: дезинформације, мамац за кликове, етичко новинарство, поверење у медије, сензационализам

1. Introduction

The paper investigates the impact of disinformation and clickbait in journalism, with special reference to the tragic shooting incident at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School in Belgrade. Through the prism of this case, it will be investigated how sensational reporting affects society, ethics and the media space itself, emphasizing the importance of ethical journalism and the role of the media in the formation of public opinion. In the context of the modern digital environment, the media has become a powerful tool that can shape public perception, often balancing between responsible reporting and the race for profit.

Journalism is under great pressure today because it is closely linked to the market and the need to attract the attention of the audience, which often leads to a decline in ethical standards. Clickbait, or clickbait, involves the use of sensational headlines and content that attract attention, but often mislead readers and do not provide the information promised. Disinformation is false or misleading

information that is intentionally created to mislead the public. Both phenomena represent significant challenges for modern journalism and lead to the erosion of public trust in the media.

Disinformation is defined as false information that is deliberately disseminated to mislead the public. They can be designed to cause panic, manipulate opinion or divert attention from important topics. In the context of mass tragedies, such as the shooting at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school, misinformation can have serious consequences, including spreading fear, stigmatizing individuals or groups, and negatively affecting the victims and their families. Given the increasingly rapid flow of information in the digital age, control over the quality and credibility of media content is becoming increasingly difficult, which makes the fight against misinformation even more difficult. Clickbait, on the other hand, often uses bombastic and sensational headlines that attract attention, but do not match or distort the content of the text. Such a practice is primarily used to increase website traffic and generate profits through advertising, but comes at the expense of accuracy and quality of information. Clickbait can further deepen the problem of disinformation, because it diverts attention from essential issues and encourages superficial information of the audience.

Journalistic ethics is a set of principles and standards that journalists should respect in their work, including accuracy, impartiality, responsibility, respect for privacy and avoidance of sensationalism. In traditional journalism, ethics serve as a guide for responsible reporting, but in the modern media environment dominated by speed and profit, ethical principles are often ignored. This is particularly evident in cases of crises and tragedies, where the desire for exclusive information and the greatest possible number of clicks often leads to the violation of basic ethical norms.

This paper will focus on the analysis of specific examples of disinformation and clickbait during the reporting of the mass murder at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School. The goal is to show how irresponsible media coverage can further worsen the tragedy and hurt the feelings of the victims, their families and the general public. The paper will present the definitions of disinformation and clickbait, as well as the types of disinformation categorized by the relevant institutions, along with an analysis of the effects that such news causes among the readership. Ethical journalism implies reporting that respects the truth, the privacy of individuals and the public interest. It is based on the principles of credibility, accuracy and responsibility towards the public. In a digital environment, where information is distributed at the speed of light, journalists often feel pressure to be the first to break the news, which can lead to incomplete or unverified reporting. This trend contributes to the spread of disinformation and clickbait, which

directly threatens the public's trust in the media. The expansion of the media, as described by Marshall McLuhan through the concept of the "global village", has made journalism a key factor in shaping society. The media have become not only transmitters of information but also key shapers of public opinion. However, given that journalism is existentially linked to the market, responsibility often loses its meaning, and interest in success gains primacy. The case of mass murder in an elementary school in Belgrade is an example of how inadequate and sensationalist reporting can have far-reaching negative consequences. Information was published minute by minute, often without checking and with serious errors that grossly violated the basic principles of journalistic ethics. The portals in charge of "fact checking" remained tasked with pointing out mistakes, but the question remains whether the corrections reached all readers or some remained permanently misinformed.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of ethical reporting and provide guidelines for journalists and the media in order to minimize the occurrence of misinformation and clickbait in reporting, especially in crisis situations. Through the analysis of concrete examples and the recommendations of experts, the paper will point out ways in which journalists can return to the basic principles of their profession, the transmission of proven and accurate information that is in the public's interest. Also, the role of official institutions in providing accurate information and how the media should behave in situations of great social importance will be investigated.

Finally, the paper will point out the importance of educating the public in recognizing fake and sensationalist news, in order to reduce their negative impact and preserve trust in the media as a pillar of a democratic society.

2. Literature review

This theoretical framework focuses on key concepts such as disinformation, clickbait and journalistic ethics. It considers the impact of fake news and sensationalism on the public and society, providing an overview of relevant literature and theoretical approaches that explain how and why these forms of information attract attention.

Since the need to transmit information arose, the problems of misinforming the public, either intentionally or unintentionally, have also arisen. The modern term "fake news" came into use especially with the development of digital media, which enable the rapid and wide dissemination of information. This problem is

further emphasized by the advent of the Internet, which accelerates the spread of misinformation more than print or radio. Motives for misinformation can be diverse, from ignorance and insufficient information to deliberate manipulation of the public in order to achieve personal interests or cause harm. These phenomena often come into conflict with the basic ethical principles of journalism and represent a serious challenge in the digital age. The basic goal of journalism is to provide accurate and reliable information that serves as a basis for making informed decisions. Without credibility and ethics, journalism loses its purpose (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Media ethics includes principles such as accuracy, impartiality and journalistic responsibility. In the context of contemporary challenges, ethics becomes crucial because it defines the boundaries between responsible journalism and sensationalism. Journalists face pressure to publish information quickly, which often leads to errors, unverified information and deviations from basic professional standards. Ethical journalism requires that journalists not only be sources of information, but also dedicated individuals who work in the public interest and who stand for accuracy, justice and accountability (Christians et al, 2016, Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Media ethics are not static; it develops and adapts in accordance with changes in technology, society and the political environment. Journalists must be prepared to adapt their approaches in order to remain true to basic principles (McQuail, 2010).

False reporting, also known as disinformation, refers to the dissemination of incorrect information that is intentionally or unintentionally misleading (Tsfati, 2020). Disinformation undermines the integrity of the media and can have serious consequences for society, including the collapse of trust in the media and the destabilization of political processes. Theories such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, Singer, 2007) and the theory of spiral silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) explain how the media shape public perception through selective reporting and repetition of certain narratives. Ethical principles in the media serve as guides for making decisions that have the potential to significantly affect the public. Ignoring these principles can have serious consequences for society (Day, 2006).

Clickbait refers to sensational headlines that are used to attract attention, but often mislead the audience because the content does not live up to the headline's promises. These titles have the goal of generating as many clicks as possible in order to make a profit through advertising, but they lead to the degradation of the quality of information and the violation of the trust of the audience. Deceptive advertising uses similar methods, manipulatively attracting users based on false information. In the digital age, the boundaries between true and false information are blurred, which makes journalistic responsibility and ethics key elements in

preserving public trust (Ward, 2011, Potthast et al, 2016). Sensationalism in reporting often blurs the line between ethics and manipulation, where journalists must carefully balance the interests of the public and potential harm to individuals or institutions (Thompson, 2000). Speculation refers to the publication of unverified or unconfirmed information that often serves sensationalist purposes. This practice can seriously threaten the public's trust in the media and lead to the spread of misinformation. Gatekeeping theory (White, 1950) helps explain how editors and journalists decide what information to publish, often under pressure from market demands and sensationalist tendencies. Media ethics must take into account all participants in the communication process, including not only the producers of information, but also the audience that receives that information (Plaisance, 2013). According to the UNESCO manual "Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation" (2018), disinformation is classified into three types:

- Misinformation: Incorrect information that is spread because a person believes it to be true.
- Disinformation: Deliberate dissemination of false information with the aim of deception.
- Malinformation: True information placed with the aim of causing harm.

These disruptions in information represent a serious threat to society because they undermine trust in the media and can cause far-reaching consequences, such as the destabilization of political processes and social peace. Global journalism requires a new ethical framework that takes into account different cultural and social contexts, as well as responsibility towards the global public (Ward, 2010).

This paper emphasizes the need to return to ethical principles in journalism in order to reduce the occurrence of disinformation, clickbait and speculative reporting. Through the analysis of literature and the application of relevant theories, the paper aims to point out the importance of responsible media reporting and offer guidelines for improving practice in accordance with the contemporary challenges of the media space.

2.1. Ethical Code

The first ethical codes for journalists were created at the beginning of the 20th century, first in the USA, and later in Europe. These codes represent basic guidelines for the journalistic profession, guiding journalists towards responsible and ethical reporting.

The Munich Declaration (1971) represents one of the most important documents regulating the rights and obligations of journalists. The declaration was adopted by representatives of journalist associations from the countries of the then European Economic Community. Its preamble emphasizes the basic right to information, free research and criticism as key freedoms of every human being. This emphasizes the responsibility of journalists towards the public and the need to respect the truth, freedom of information and impartial reporting.

The Munich Declaration defines the obligations of journalists, including respect for the truth, protection of privacy, correction of inaccurate information and avoidance of dishonest data collection methods (Lorimer, 1998). The declaration also protects the rights of journalists, including free access to information and the right to independence in work.

The International Federation of Journalists later adopted the Declaration on the Principles of Journalists' Conduct, which further emphasizes the need to respect the truth and freedom of information. Journalists are instructed to use honorable methods in gathering information, avoid discrimination and perform their tasks responsibly (Windt et al, 1989).

Although there is no single code of ethics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are standards that journalists can use, such as the Code of Honor of BiH Journalists from 2004, the Press Code, and the regulations of the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK). These documents are aligned with international guidelines and lay the foundations for ethical reporting.

Relevant literature shows that ethics in journalism is essential for maintaining public trust. Ethics not only ensures respect for the truth and professional standards, but also protects the rights of journalists to work independently and responsibly, which is necessary for a healthy democratic process.

3. Methodological Framework

In this paper, a qualitative methodology is applied based on the analysis of the content of journalistic publications and expert comments related to the case of shooting and mass murder in the Elementary School "Vladislav Ribnikar" in Vračar, Belgrade. The analysis includes media platforms and journalistic practices, focusing on issues of ethics, accuracy, manipulation of information and influence on the public.

The data was collected through the analysis of newspaper articles, publications on online platforms, expert comments and reactions of professional

organizations and institutions to media coverage of a specific event. Primary and secondary sources were used, including content from portals without an imprint, and relevant publications from sites dealing with fact checking were analyzed.

Content analysis was applied at several levels:

- Quantitative aspect: Number of publications related to the case, frequency of use of sensationalist and clickbait titles, and identification of the source of information (ownership of the portal, presence of an imprint, etc.).
- Qualitative aspect: Analysis of ethical standards in reporting, including accuracy, bias and level of responsibility of journalists. Special attention is paid to the way the media treat victims' privacy, the use of graphic images and language that causes emotional reactions.

The case study provides an in-depth analysis of specific examples of media coverage of the school shooting in Vračar, highlighting how the information was disseminated and the consequences of such coverage. Readers' reactions, the influence of misinformation and clickbait content on public opinion, as well as the implications for the ethics of the journalistic profession were studied.

In addition to the analysis of media content, the reactions of experts and professional associations, such as the Press Council, the Association of Journalists of Serbia and other relevant bodies, were also considered in the context of reporting on crisis situations. Institutional recommendations on responsible reporting in moments of crisis were analyzed in order to determine where the media deviate from ethical standards.

The paper provides definitions of key terms, including disinformation, clickbait and ethics, and explores how different types of disinformation influence public perception. Examples were discussed in the context of media practice in Serbia and beyond, with special reference to the importance of ethical reporting in crisis situations.

The paper analyzes the use of sources in media reporting, including an assessment of the relevance, reliability and ethical standards of the sources used. Based on the analysis, recommendations were proposed for the improvement of journalistic practice in relation to sensationalist and false information.

The research indicates the importance of responsible reporting in the context of the spread of disinformation and clickbait, and analyzes how such reporting can shape public opinion and trust in the media. The role of the media as "keepers" of accurate information is considered crucial, especially in societies in transition, where journalism often balances between professional norms and market pressures.

This methodological approach enables a detailed understanding of ethical problems in media reporting and provides the basis for the further development of strategies aimed at improving the quality of journalism in the region.

4. Overview and Research Results

The research in this paper is focused on the analysis of the media coverage of the mass murder in the Elementary School "Vladislav Ribnikar" in Vračar, with a focus on ethical aspects, the presence of disinformation and clickbait, and the consequences of such coverage on the public. The goal was to determine how the media reported on this tragic event and what consequences such content had on information consumers.

The paper investigates the negative aspects of journalistic reporting in the digital age through a case study of a mass murder in the Elementary School "Vladislav Ribnikar" in Belgrade. Based on the analysis of reporting in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the research points out that the globalization of the media and the speed of information dissemination has led to numerous ethical failures, including sensationalism, publication of inaccurate information and violation of privacy.

The Global Village and Media Responsibility: The concept of the "global village" introduced by Marshall McLuhan (1962) shows how the Internet and the global network make information available to everyone in real time. In such an environment, the media's responsibility to provide accurate and verified information increases significantly, as errors and misinformation can have a global reach.

Inaccurate reporting and sensationalism were key in the case of the murders at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school, many media published unverified information, such as the claim that the history teacher was killed, which was not true. Such a practice caused additional confusion and hurt the victims' families. Sensational headlines like "Bloody Feast" or "Horrible Massacre" further shocked the public instead of informing. The media turned tragedies into a sensation with such headlines. Many media outlets used sensationalist headlines like "PARENTS SCREAM IN FRONT OF THE EMERGENCY CENTER!" or "BLOOD PIER PLANNED FOR A MONTH", which were often taken out of context and did not correspond to the content of the article. These headlines served to attract readers, but resulted in a feeling of deception and a loss of trust in the media. Also, on the first day of the shooting, many media reported that the history teacher was killed, while in reality

she was seriously wounded and later recovered. Some portals kept inaccurate information months later without correction, thereby further hurting the victim's family and collapsing journalistic standards.³

War of half-truths between positional and opposition portals: The statement of an expert on N1 television that the boy attacker should be released was used by the pro-government media to create a false image of the position of the opposition portal. The informer published the headline: "Scum from N1 demands that the killer of eight children in the Elementary School in Vračar be released", which is an example of distorting information for the sake of political calculations.

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At the press conference, the chief of the Belgrade police showed a list of the children the attacker planned to kill, and many media outlets published photos on which the names were clearly visible. This procedure grossly violated the privacy and safety of children, which is directly contrary to journalistic codes that mandate the protection of the identity of minors.

As already pointed out in this paper, the murder at the school in Vračar was assessed as the greatest tragedy in the recent history of Serbia. The event in itself attracted a lot of attention because it is about children, killed in a place that should be the safest, in the school where their parents sent them to be educated and which was reputed to be elite. Due to the very nature of the event, even an "ordinary" text title would attract readers, but most portals raced to attract additional clicks, turning the tragedy into a sensation. Thus, in the titles you could see words such as "shocking", "shocking", "bloody feast" and the like, up to "horrible massacre" (!?) as if it could be a beautiful massacre.

Below are some of the examples from examples from BiH and Serbia:

- PARENTS SCREAMING IN FRONT OF THE EMERGENCY CENTER! Doctors are fighting for the lives of six students, among the injured are two teachers! (Informer)⁵

³ On May 7, 2023, on certain portals in Serbia it is still visible that initially incorrect information was transmitted (Nova, Novi glas, Srbin info, Direktno, Mondo, Serbian tajms), and the same situation is with portals from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Prijedor 24h, Bosna info, Hayat, Press media and Serbian info). The incorrect news was denied in the daily TV Pink, as well as on the Serbian portals Srbija Danas, Alo, Lajk, Danasnje, Republika (Fakenews.rs).

⁴ N1 television and the web portal are opposition media that often criticize the current government, and the words spoken by their guest were used by media that support the government to deal with the competition. Portal Informer directly attributed Aleksandar Fatić's statement to N1 television and on its portal on May 6, 2023 published the text of the headline: "Scum from N1 demands that the killer of eight children in the Elementary School in Vračar be released and enrolled in another school (VIDEO)".

⁵ <https://informer.rs/hronika/vesti/790433/novi-detajli-o-decaku-koji-je-pocinio-masakr-u-skolikosta-je-bio-jedan-od-najboljih-daka-osvajao-je-brojne-nagrade>

- This text has only five sentences, there is no mention of “parents’ screams”, but it is stated that “crying parents” gathered in front of the hospital, which is expected in the mentioned situation, but the title tries to provoke the reader’s reaction to click on the text.
- Milica Todorović shaken after the mass shooting at school: She revealed additional sad news (Nova.rs) ⁶
- The news was made from a screenshot of Miliča’s post on the Instagram social network, and the additional sad news she revealed was that her grandfather also died in that tragedy. This is also clickbait and it would be distasteful for a serious journalist to make news out of such a post.
- THE COLD-BLOODED KILLER BOY SHOCKS EVERYONE: Kosta is convinced that he did nothing wrong - he only asked for THIS (Srbija Danas) ⁷
- The text has nothing to do with the title and there is no answer to what the boy was looking for. There is no specified source of information and everything is in the realm of speculation. Clickbait title on empty text.
- DID KOSTA HAVE AN ACCOMPLICE?! The handwriting on the kill list caused panic - forensic scientists solved the mystery (Srbija Danas) ⁸
- Despite the bombastic title that resembles clickbait, the text is not completely empty. Namely, it was created in response to a “conspiracy theory” that immediately appeared on social networks, and the Alternative Television portal from Banjaluka contacted a master’s degree in graphic technology engineering who solved the “mystery” of whether the boy had an accomplice. Portal Srbija Danas gave the text a more bombastic title than ATV, from where it was taken.
- KOSTINA’S MOTHER NOTICED A STRANGE THING ON THE FATAL MORNING! Details of Miljana Kecmanović’s statement about the shooting (Republika.rs)⁹
- Of course, the mother did not reveal anything strange in the text. The text only states that “she described how her son behaved on the fateful morning when the shooting happened”, but there are no details, but already known facts are stated.
- TERRIBLE SCENE IN FRONT OF THE SCHOOL WHERE THE MASSACRE WAS PERMITTED: Emergency services responded to Vračar (VIDEO) (Republika.rs)¹⁰

⁶ <https://nova.rs/zabava/sudbine/milica-todorovic-potresena-nakon-masovne-pucnjave-u-skoli-otkrila-i-dodatne-tuzne-vesti/>

⁷ <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/hronika/kosta-trazi-samo-jedno-sok-ponasanje-vinovnika-masakra-na-vcacaru-evo-sta-ga-interesuje-2023-05-08>

⁸ <https://www.sd.rs/sr/vesti/hronika/da-li-je-kosta-imao-saucesnika-rukopis-na-listi-za-odstrel-izazvao-paniku-foreznicari-resili-2023-05-04>

⁹ <https://www.republika.rs/hronika/hronika/438908/majka-koste-kecmanovica-izjava>

¹⁰ <https://www.republika.rs/hronika/hronika/433080/devojci-pozlilo-vcacar>

- There is no mention of a terrible scene in the text. Namely, people gathered in front of the school where the murder took place to light candles for the victims. The girl holding her head was filmed, but there is no mention of an ambulance intervention. Classic misleading clickbait and sensationalism.
- BLOODY PIR PLANNED FOR A MONTH A gruesome LIST FOR THE EXECUTION OF STUDENTS FROM VRACAR IS PUBLISHED (Serbia Danas)¹¹

The bombastic title was taken from a report from a press conference where it was announced that the boy had a list of children he planned to kill and that he had been hatching the plan for a month. The news was published on the same day when the shooting took place, numerous journalists attended the conference, so the media had the same information, and fought for every single click with a bombastic headline.

- THESE ARE THE KILLED CHILDREN IN THE VRACAR SCHOOL MASSACRE A student shot with two guns in the elementary school, and eight children and a guard were injured (Alo)¹²

Although the average reader who clicks on this link without much thought would expect photos of the children, or at least their names (without going into the ethics of publishing this data), the text does not contain that, but only the initials of the children killed in the shooting are listed, so it is about classic clickbait title. Common to all the above news stories with headlines created to entice the reader to click on the text link is the following:

- not a single news item begins with new information related to the case (because there is none), but in the first paragraphs already known information is stated, which as a rule should be in the background and at the end of the text;
- there is no trace of the bombastic discovery announced by the title in the text,
- in most cases, the news is based on “conspiracy theories”, “speculations” and dubious information collected from social networks, which could have been published by anyone without bearing any serious responsibility,
- in most cases, this news is not relevant for informing the public, but rather sensationalism and exaggerated facts,
- the portals did not take into account the effect that the bombastic headlines that they put to the public on the same day when the murder took place and when the public is already shaken, will cause.

¹¹ <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/hronika/krvavi-pir-planirao-mesec-dana-objavljena-jeziva-lista-za-odstrel-ucenika-sa-vracara-2023-05-03>

¹² <https://www.alo.rs/hronika/crna-hronika/755062/ovo-su-ubijena-deca-u-masakru-u-skoli-na-vracaru-ucenik-je-sa-dva-pistolja-pucao-u-osnovnoj-skoli-a-nastradalo-je-osmoro-dece-i-cuvar/vest>

- most of these news items were not signed by the journalists who produced them, but the responsibility lies with the editorial staff,
- after reading each of the mentioned news, the reader feels cheated because he did not get the information he expected and that the headline announced.

The media obviously squeezed out the story and sensational details, and according to my observation, important information remained in their shadows, such as the call of the police to the parents of the students of the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, who in the moments immediately after the shooting were unable to find their children, to let them know; the announcement by the Minister of Health of Serbia, Danica Grujičić, that help lines will be opened for children, but also for adults who have survived trauma and need professional help, remained in the shadows. This information is also in the interest of the public, they should have received more space on the portals, but they didn't, which I consider a failure of the journalistic profession. If journalists and editors of online media in Serbia had adhered to their Journalistic Code, comparably less damage to the public would have occurred. First and foremost, but also the most important, the identity of all the children in connection with the murder in the elementary school "Vladislav Ribnikar", including the attacker himself, would be protected. Today, the public would not know most of the information about the boy who shot at the school, nor would his family and younger sister be exposed as if on a platter. Also, journalists should have protected all minor children, instead of publishing the list of their names made by the attacker and additionally exposing them to danger, and their families to stress and fear. Most of the details presented do not inform but intimidate the public, expose perpetrators, victims and their families to risks and additional trauma, and some can potentially inspire similar crimes (Raskrinkavanje.rs).¹³

In the case of the shooting at the school in Vračar, perhaps the most radical violation of journalistic ethics concerns the publication of a list of the names of the children the attacker intended to kill. Numerous online media have published the list so that the names of the children are clearly legible, and it also includes children who survived the shooting. So, journalists and editors once again gave children to the public, and to individuals with different intentions, without thinking about the possible consequences. The online media in Bosnia and Herzegovina that obscured the names on the list are Srpska info, Nezavisne novine, Avaz, Aloonline.ba, while the Klix portal did not even publish a photo of the list.

¹³ <https://www.raskrinkavanje.rs/page.php?id=Krvavi-pir---nekima-klikovi-nekima-traume--Gde-su-sve-mediji-gresili-ove-nedelje-1174>

On Serbian portals, the list of children was still available at the time of the creation of this thesis, namely on B92, Večernje novosti, Republika, Alo!, while the names were obscured by the portals Espresso, Kurir, Telegraf, Blic. On the Pink portal, they blurred the names “to respect the form”, but they are still legible. Such irresponsible and unethical reporting can lead to re-traumatization of the witnesses of the shooting, and to panic among the public, because sensationalism creates a feeling of threatened security. People do not feel safe, so there is collective fear, anxiety, agitation, withdrawal (Raskrinkanje.rs).¹⁴

Based on the analysis of the media, we see the necessity of strengthening ethical journalism. Journalists and editors must consistently respect the principles of journalistic ethics, especially when it comes to reporting on tragic events. The media should avoid sensationalism and focus on accurate and responsible information. It is important to raise the level of media literacy among citizens so that they can recognize fake and unethical news. This can help reduce the influence of sensationalism and strengthen a critical approach to information. Regulation of digital media is necessary in our region. Introducing legal frameworks for online media could reduce the amount of misinformation and encourage media to adhere to ethical standards.

This paper shows that irresponsible and unethical reporting can have serious consequences for society, including breaking trust in the media, traumatizing affected families, and creating a climate of fear and insecurity among citizens. It is important that the media recognize their responsibility in the digital age and return to the fundamental values of journalism. The influence of media politicization in this case was very prominent. The analysis shows that certain media manipulated information for political purposes, which further worsened the state of information. The research points to the need to restore ethical standards in journalism, especially in the digital age when the speed of information dissemination is high, and mistakes have far-reaching consequences.

Conclusion

This paper shows serious shortcomings in the media reporting in the case of a mass murder in the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Elementary School in Belgrade, as well as the wider consequences of such an approach. In the modern media space, the speed of information dissemination via the Internet, social networks and portals makes events accessible to a global audience almost instantly. However, with

¹⁴ <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Krvavi-pir---nekima-klikovi-nekima-traume--Gde-su-sve-mediji-gresili-ove-nedelje-1174>

this speed comes the increased responsibility of the media to publish accurate, verified and ethically acceptable information.

Sensationalism and inaccurate information are solely in the service of attracting attention and clicks, often without any real content to justify such claims. We have seen that sensationalist reporting of mass murders can encourage imitation of the crime, known as the "contagion effect". In the case of Serbia, the mass murder in Mladenovac, which happened just one day after the tragedy in Belgrade, shows how important responsible reporting is. There were threats among children who identified with the attacker and glorified his actions, which is a direct consequence of inadequate media coverage.

We have already emphasized that the publication of the list of the names of the children that the attacker planned to kill represents a serious violation of privacy and a violation of the ethical norms of journalism. As a result, children are further exposed to danger, and their families are traumatized. This kind of behavior shows the complete irresponsibility of the media, which, in the race for exclusivity, ignore basic human values and safety.

This is not just one isolated example of reporting. There are many such examples. And each of them has far-reaching consequences. Unethical reporting leads directly to the erosion of public trust in journalists and media houses. Citizens become skeptical of the media, which can result in fewer readers and reduced advertising revenue. Irresponsible reporting often leads to misleading citizens and manipulation of public opinion. Instead of informing, the media often further complicates the situation, diverting attention from important issues and creating a feeling of fear and insecurity. The continuous marketing of sensationalist and unverified news contributes to the creation of generations who do not know how to think critically and who rely on shallow and often inaccurate information.

In conclusion, we can present several recommendations that could influence the better application of ethical standards in the media. The introduction of legal frameworks that would regulate the work of online media can reduce the number of misinformation and encourage responsible journalism. Sanctioning portals that spread fake news can contribute to better informing the public. Given that citizens trust the media, it is important to educate citizens on recognizing fake and sensationalist news. Planned media literacy can help citizens become more aware of their influence on the spread of information and not be passive consumers of misinformation.

Citing all the examples, we can also conclude that more stimulating incomes and better working conditions can motivate journalists to devote themselves to responsible reporting, and not to the race for clicks. Investments in the professional training of journalists and additional education on ethics can significantly improve the quality of journalism. The media should pay more attention to the

stories of victims, heroes and communities that come together in difficult times. Instead of glorifying the attackers, the focus should be on empathy, solidarity and humanity. Today's media has the power to shape public opinion, but with that power comes enormous responsibility. Journalists must be aware of the consequences of their reporting and try to avoid sensationalism, misinformation and violation of privacy. Only responsible, objective and ethically correct reporting can contribute to building trust, informing the public and preventing future tragedies.

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