

## Case Study

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# The narrative in digital space, hate speech, fake news, and attempt for their ethical cleansing

## Abstract

This paper raises the question of the need for “detoxification”, the ethical purification of the narrative in the digital space. The serious penetration of hate speech and fake news in this area becomes a serious ethical problem for any society. The Republic of North Macedonia is no exception to such global communication trends. The paper presents an author analysis of several months of trends in media reporting during the Local Elections in the municipality of Karpos 2013, through data from the big data platform and analysis of hate speech on a homophobic basis in cyber-space during the 2021 Pride Parade. Both cases show that fake news and hate speech have a high degree of virulence, with the priority being the truth, then the media that accept such speech, then the general public and especially the young people who are the most frequent consumers of such speech. Research shows that the source of such speech is political discourse, and religion, tradition, ideology, sexual orientation, mental health and other differences are abused for their own purposes. Both cases show that hate speech has a growing trend and that it is more than necessary to act on a purge on several fronts. The first is the introduction of regulation in cyberspace, strictly against hate speech, but with due attention to the right to freedom of speech i.e., caution against hyper-regulation and second, long-term, but also with long-term feeding back is the media literacy that should start from the earliest age i.e., from the moment when the young population first meets and begins to use any kind of communication cyberspace. In the Republic of North Macedonia, some steps have already been taken in the legislation, in the adoption of codes of ethics, partial criminalization of hate speech, as well as in the field of media literacy in a completely rudimentary form.

### Keywords:

Ethics, digital speech, hate speech, fake news

# Introduction

If we try to make a thread connecting Heraclitus' belief that the world is in accordance with the Logos (literally, "word", "reason" or "account") then cyberspace can be defined as a digital paradise in the context of freedom of speech. However, in the spirit of Heraclitus the Dark, who says that the word (Logos) is basically made of fire (or the word is the source of all evil A/N), then the same space is also the legal enclave of hate speech which is in a penetrating trend. On the other hand, if we assume the idea of John Locke and his "blank slate", "white paper"), then the question arises: Who first started to contaminate the communication site, especially in the digital sphere, the Internet and social networks, not excluding the classic mass media.

We will make an attempt to locate the influence of the biggest influencers and opinion makers in the public discourse, through the specifics of their speech and the accompanying forms of communication, through mainly, two empirical cases in the Republic of North Macedonia. Both cases are related to the virulence of hate speech. The first is in the field of political democracy and its power to infect the media space, and the second in the field of human rights and discrimination on several grounds: gender, ethnic, etc.

No dilemma exist anymore that political communication today is not only an aid to achieving a goal, but also part of political action. "Primeval evil" (the original crime) may have originated from the most misinterpreted philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli and his never-written sentence: "The end justifies the means", instead of the authentic translation "The end determines the means". However, politics and politicians focused on the ultimate goal - power and authority, they have literally mastered both variants of Machiavelli's interpretation of thought, and with the overall intonation they use in everyday politics (and intensified in pre-election) it is empirically confirmed to contaminate the media space.

This primarily refers to the connection of (un)ethnically intonated campaigns and their indisputable connection with the way of media reporting, which are sometimes difficult to prove; however, their parallel intertwining can certainly be measured quantitatively and described qualitatively. Finally, they create a picture of the reality of the electorate and the citizens, where it is reflected through the act of voting, and consequently at the conception of social discourse in all walks of life. Hence, the public interest and the ethical motive for encouraging positive communication in political campaigns i.e., the fight against propaganda and hate speech, as part of the cleansing of the communication site at all levels.

## And what actually happens in practice?

We are witnessing that public speech has gradually but surely turned into hate speech. In such discourse, propaganda replaced information, defamation and lies are spread about the politically "different" and political communication turned into provocative hysteria. In such created real state, the insertion of intonation into political-media discourse (Vacić, 2004: 7) three battles are won: the war for the media, the war in the media (in their home territories), and then, using the subordinate media, the submissive journalism and media were obtained, which, in the end, started a war with each other. As a result, the first victim in this area was the truth, and then the citizens who are definitely deprived of truth.

On the other side of the social scene is the theoretical knowledge that the task of ethics is to reach the truth of morality as a regulator of social life. Politics and politicians as well as their communication teams have accurately located the “G-spot”, the “underbelly” of the general public and knew exactly how to affect public discourse. With their speech, language, images, and emoticons (like audiovisual communication) they persistently pull the card of reciprocal effects: shock states, anger, hatred, astonishment, rage in the reader and the transgressor (Eco, 1995), and the final effect is causing frustration, anxiety, constant anticipation of something dreadful, undefined threat, prolonged fear, all to apathy and collective depression.

In order to support the adversity, except in the purely political communication of opposing ideological rivals (the neoliberal left wing, in the Macedonian case, SDSM and the right wing VMRO-DPMNE A/N), the same methods and tools are also used (again predominantly through political vocabulary) in spreading hate speech in the field of sexual rights and freedoms, LGBTI rights, social inclusion for persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious affiliation, etc. ([www.govornaomraza.mk](http://www.govornaomraza.mk)).

Even in these spheres of life, the presence of hate speech and creation of lies (fake news), the ideological matrix is more than legible backed up by policy that in nature is different from morality. While morality is based on belief, politics aspires to power to achieve its own goals, ideologically or selfishly.

## Research methodology

Analyzing narrative (language concepts), messages and practices in several public segmentations: politicians and political parties, media, quasi-activists and other groups and individuals (in order to discredit the opponent, dissident or gain the benefit of the general public) we need to demonstrate whether and how much public discourse is actually contaminated and delves deeper into the ethical freedoms that are seriously affected through strategic manipulations in public discourse. In doing so, maximizing public impact is the first step that will empirically lead us to two extremes: social apathy or anxiety before possible activism in an undesirable direction from a moral, and in general from a value aspect.

The focus of the media communication narrative (mostly digital space) through hate speech, fake or manipulative news can be illustrated through two exact empirical sets of data:

-Through the “Local Elections - Karposh 2013” case study, with an original (author’s own) presentation of a campaign in the Republic of Macedonia, conducted in a way that is increasingly present in our country, where the ethical principles of political communication are affected reflecting the media narrative space, and as feedback to the public in general.

After applying several research methods, quantitative and qualitative media analysis, using a big-data platform, or press clipping of a specialized outsourcing company (Image PR)<sup>1</sup>, general trends that are immanent to our political campaigns can be rendered as well as the specifics of media discourse, their susceptibility, and the reciprocal power of influence, directly related to campaign reporting and analysis, which together create a uniform code of ethics.

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1 [ImagePR](#), the first independent specialized public relations agency in Macedonia, was selected by the Municipality of Karposh in a public tender for support in strategic communications and also its PR Studio for the development of continuous press clipping in several consecutive years, during the Local Elections Karposh 2013, which are the main topic of analysis by the author of this paper. The daily, monthly and annual reports are the property of the Municipality of Karposh.

The second case is a presentation of homophobic and transphobic hate speech analyzed in the Report on Hate Speech based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity for the period 15.05.-15.07.2021 (Drndarevska, Atanasovska, 2021) through which one can see a wash with hate speech on social networks in the context of the Pride Parade. That points out the phenomenon and the way in which the general public creates the image that LGBTI persons are unwanted, further inflames hatred and incites acts of violence and discrimination.

Through the desk and contextual analysis of the Report of the Subversive Front<sup>2</sup>, and the analysis of the trends related to the anti-gender movement in Macedonia and internationally, among other, an attempt is made to determine the factors influencing the strengthening of conservative and authoritarian trends, a framework in which affective hate speech was created, the so-called anti-gender movement, all the way to real violence and gender-based discrimination.

## Data analysis

### Local elections Karposh 2013

The elections held on March 24 (first round) and April 7 (second round) 2013 significantly affected the increase of media interest and intensified reporting on the Municipality of Karposh, the institution Mayor of the Municipality of Karposh, the candidate for mayor Stevco Jakimovski and consequently introduction of the topic “Local Elections” in direct correlation with the previous three keywords.

If we compare the quantity of reporting through monthly analyzes, two months before and two months after the local elections, and in the months of the “Local Elections 2013”, we will see that the “interest” in media coverage varies drastically.

Thus, in January, although the Municipality of Karposh is considered one of the most attractive and active municipalities as well as the mayor as an institution and a person, the number of media reports would be large and satisfactory (a total of 436 coverages in all types of media: classic mass media and the Internet). 224 Internet posts dominate for the Municipality, of which, according to the intonation, 130 are neutral, 92 positive and only two negative. Two months later, however, when the “battle for Karposh” actually begins, according to the analysis of the press clipping, in the two “decisive” months, March and April, when the election campaign was in full swing, the monitoring of the events (through the number of media contents, but also according to the tonality), is multiplied by an almost geometric progression.

Already in March, the total number of media reports reached 1,581, of which 988 on the Internet, while in April (the second round of elections) pieces of media content reached 1,565, of which 936 on the Internet portals.

After the end of the “fierce election period”, from May to June there is a drastic decline in media coverage, which can be interpreted as an “already resolved topic” i.e., the official end of the “Local Elections 2013” and a certain outcome. In practice, in addition to the drastic fall in the number of media coverages, which was almost fivefold (from 1565 to 292, or 324) there is a change in key topics (keywords) of interest to the media. Reasonably, the key topic “Local Elections” disappears.

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2 Subversive front is the Association for Sexual and Gender Minorities within which the Report on hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity for the period 15.5.-15.7.2021 was prepared by Dragana Drndarevska and Slavica Anastasovska, Skopje. August 2021)

The increase from 436 to 1581 i.e., 1,565 pieces of media content, in March or April, or almost four times more than in January, explains several issues: actual political moment, “heat” of the campaign, but also the rapid interest of the media that report on the mayoral elections. Primacy is taken by the social media according to the number of posts.

For the election months March and April, a qualitative change in the narrative is indicative i.e., more visible “coloring” of the notifications in a positive or negative context. Neutral coverages still dominate, but the impression remains that they are transmitters of the political vocabulary used in the offline space. News aggregators of the information internet portals in that period registered mass downloads of the verbal duels, negative campaign in any form, and the narrative used therein, which de facto contaminates the media space.

So, in that period of intense follow up of political campaigns conceived with their communicative narrative, hate speech, mutual slander, denigration, or “shower of mud” as it is called in some American political experiences, begins to spread in the communication site.

Behind anonymous authors with the so-called nickname @Stevce-grevce on the YouTube platform videos were posted that had no informative component other than personal discrediting, with fabricated or unverified data and an intriguing call: “You did not have any idea: Look at this”.

The extent to which the hate speech directed at the political rival posted on the Internet (and taken by the media without any critics) extends, is shown by the example first transmitted in one media outlet, Republika.mk, and then taken by the aggregate (time.mk). In this case, a street dog is dressed in the dress code with the election number of the candidate Stevcho Jakimovski, which raises two allusions to the public, that the candidate is a dog, or that only dogs would vote for number 8, more precisely for Stevco Jakimovski which is a direct insult both for the candidate and for the electorate. Such creativity is widely distributed in all print and electronic media.

The more intensified the campaign, the more escalated the rhetoric and range of “paratexts” (Eco, U pp.27 1993) messages that precede, accompany or follow the speech or text (advertising messages, titles, subtitles, prefaces, comments) which in this example are aimed at political opponents that are seen as the primary threat.

A news item was posted on the local website Kurir with an illustration in which the former party sent a wreath to the candidate for mayor Stevcho Jakimovski with the message “rest in peace”, with an allusion that he is dead to them or that they wish him (political) death.

If we follow the political campaigns during the local and parliamentary elections, we can see a series of mutual conditionality in the manner of creating and conducting political campaigns with the way of media reporting.

Apart from the experience with “Local Elections Karpos 2013”, where the analyzed data from the big data platform made by PR Studio on Image PR, this view is confirmed by the Local Elections in the Republic of Croatia 2013, more precisely Predrag Haramija and Jagoda Poropat Darrer in their paper “Negative Electoral campaign-causes and consequences” claimed that politics and politicians greatly affect people’s lives. That is why politics should be an area of human action in which ethics or ethically correct behavior will be the most important, while placing a special emphasis on the responsibility of public relations and advertising (asmedia). (Haramija, P., Poropat Darrer, J. (2014: 19).

The media, by their function, convey the tonality and manner of political speech to the public, the readers (potential electorate), which means if it is dominated by negative (hate speech), neutral or

positive, by the very quotation, such speech prevails and in the media reports. The period of inclusion of the political momentum - local elections has a rapid impact on the increase of media coverage in volume. It is the matter of “stickiness” to the topics and the offered audio, visual and written contents, messages or comprehensive communication strategies with the intensity of following and reporting by the traditional mass media, and mainly by the modern social media, especially Internet portals as well as all available platforms, which take seriously the primacy in political and in media communication with the target audience.

Moreover, both theoretical and practical experiences go in that direction according to the fact (Kiss & Hobolt 2012: 5-8) that the media are more inclined to report on a negative campaign and that a relevantly based negative campaign offers more information than usual.

Although a negative campaign as a political strategy that seeks to win votes by attacking and criticizing a political opponent has been an “imported” practice from the United States for “only” the last decade, and is ruthless in Europe, (Van Muiswinkel 2012: 2), in the last election cycles, it is even a dominant strategy in our country. However, it must be borne in mind that no matter how much the negative impact of the negative campaign on political discourse and communication is confirmed, as well as the media coverage, in a “package” with the tone, it is indisputable that it has a mobilizing effect on voters and we would say “Polarized” on the political opponent, the subject of the black campaign. Experiences from the reports, but also from the outcome of the local elections show that negative messages with or without content, and with a tone that causes anxiety, have a much greater negative impact when it comes to a competitor party than to an individual.

Moreover, according to some knowledge, negative campaigns not only sometimes prove to be more informative (Sides, Lipsitz & Grossmann 2010: 504) but also give a chance to re-evaluate a policy or attitude, even treating it as more democratic, although at the moment remains a dilemma in scientific, media and political circles about the positive or negative effects of the negative campaign.

Not only is the political space and vocabulary tainted, and as such transmitted in the media discourse, but also other sensitive social topics and spheres of everyday life (human rights in general, inclusion of persons with disabilities, gender identity issues, religious and ethnic issues, the problem with refugees, etc.) enter the domain of political interest and struggle for influence, on the one hand, and uncritical shift in part of the media, on the other.

## The Pride Parade and Homophobic Hate Speech

In the period of multiple events that increase the visibility of LGBTI persons, such as the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, the Weekend of Pride and the Pride Parade (from May 15 to July 15, 2021) LGBTI issues occupy a larger part of the public space than usual, the focus of the media and the public is on the Pride Parade and other LGBTI right issues, which encourage discussions and comments. Especially during the Pride Parade, which is covered by all media, the public opinion can be most appropriately seen and the homophobic and transphobic hate speech can be shown (Drndarevska, Atanasovska, 2021 p.5.). According to them:

*“In the reporting period, 111 cases of hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity were documented, most of which on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and a smaller number on web portals. Hence, it is not a representative, but a random sample, which is still sufficient to show the dominant discourse created by such speech. Most of the documented cases are posts accompanied by numerous comments of hate speech, and in some individual comments hate speech were documented by online media. 14 (fourteen) cases are presented and analyzed and reported to the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department of the Ministry of Interior and to the self-regulatory body, Council of Media Ethics. In this case, too, it is a purposive sample, collected by the most active associations in the area, according to which a relevant picture can be obtained on how institutions act.”*

That it is a matter of hate speech and homophobia with an extremely affected social discourse is shown by the comparative analysis of posts during the Pride Parade two years earlier, when the first Pride Parade was announced by the National Network against Homophobia and Transphobia (NMHT) on May 20, 2019. Immediately after the announcement, bias, contempt and intolerance towards the diverse through unashamed hate speech pervaded social networks. A total of 159 reports were registered on the *govornaomraza.mk* platform for the period from May 15 to July 15, of which 52% or 98 reports were based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

If hate speech is often defined as engagement in the act i.e., violent activities, especially in the sphere of diversity (gender, ethnic) which in the real situation is confirmed (when a participant in the Parade was attacked) such examples speak of the need for intervention of several social levels: educational, ethical, security, regulatory...

## Discussion

Using one of their legitimate selection functions in the creation of events, the media have the power to thematize, or to impose a dominant topic or topics. In the internet space, search engine algorithms, news aggregators, or available Google analytics (SEO Analytics and Reporting) do that for them. Media thematization, or targeted imposition of a topic, can be done in case some of the political actors intentionally aspire or do not want certain topics to come to light (affairs, scandals, etc.). The media then have the power to impose the topic in their reporting, with intonation, frequency of reports, the place and the way where and how they will publish it thus influencing which topics will be dominant in society (environment, human rights and freedoms, corruption, etc.) at the macro level as well as their strength and importance in segmented publics at the micro level (protection of greenery, excessive construction of buildings, excessive urbanization, construction of monuments, pride parades, introduction of CSE-Comprehensive Sexual Education in the education system, etc.), which is also called Agenda-Setting Theory (Brettschneider 1998: 635).

In cyberspace, Google analytics can recognize this through the identification of paid or organically generated posts, and Google itself offers a new “Top stories design on desktop”.

Only two-three months ago a Google spokesperson confirmed that this new design with Search Engine Land is rolling out globally. “We’re always working to make it easier for persons to dive into the most useful, timely articles (texts A/N) available through Search to help them form a better understanding of the world and topics they care about most (Schwartz on December 6, 2021).”

However, the policy-media feedback is more than obvious.

In such a “game” of hate speech and expedient creation of lies (fake news) no one remains innocent: neither the author of the news (e.g., politics or political ideology A/N), nor the narrator who conveys the style (usually the media) nor the reader (the public as the recipient).

Therefore, political actors must be constantly vigilant about public opinion and what is published in the media. Otherwise, underestimating or post festum valuing public opinion in the event of delay in terms of the dynamics of political developments can cost them dearly. As a result, political actors who are, provisionally, in a better starting position in the current political moment in the system, impose topics that are proactive, affirmative, through information, advertising and positive communication, in a manner more favorable to them, following successes and achievements, in order for the media echo to achieve the desired dimension of their work. If all this is ignored, on the other side of the media mirror, with critical reporting and even complete distortion of the facts (negative reporting), the messages that the political actors originally wanted to send to the public, can be set aside. Here one can also find a gap where the negative campaign can easily penetrate and make disorientation and even a dramatic turn in the public perception.

On the other hand, political actors who at a certain social or political moment do not have access to established and influential media in the political arena assume a bottom-up strategy (Kriesi 2011: 247), when staging media events that with their informative value completely occupy the attention of both the public and the media. Surprise, spectacularity, negativity and personalization factors are usually used here. They are the stickiest topics that are the basic “hook” of the negative campaign, and at the same time “food” for the media. This means that if one fails to personalize one’s successes, achievements, competence, personal integrity, then the door is wide open to everything that is the opposite: incompetence, ineffectiveness, questionable personal integrity of the one who aspires to govern, etc. The media follow, download and influence.

The media, and lately the free cyberspace i.e., web portals, blogs, and even platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are a public forum in which political rivals fight fiercely for attention and gaining trust of the audience or the general or segmented public. In fact, this confirms the thesis that we are becoming a media society in which the way of communication is crucial not only for political actors, but also for the overall political, economic and social environment, current or anticipated. They become a socially integrating or disintegrating factor to the extent that the more present one is, the more visible or imperceptible one is. Politicians “learned” this through their communicators and communication strategists, and the public i.e., the audience, got involved in that interaction more instinctively, especially as the doors to intense two-way communication opened, turning it even into a rectifier, if not a creator of public opinion and the perception of what is being offered to them as a political or other proposal that existentially affects them. But do social media become absolute masters of truth and the only bearers of moral (verbal) evil?

Perhaps in this dilemma we can locate the extremely critical attitude that Noam Chomsky, one of the most famous anti-globalists and world analysts at the moment, has towards the campaigns (which are understandably supported by PR strategists i.e., communication teams A/N). More than eight years ago, while lecturing in Bonn, he said that the role of PR services today is to undermine democracy. Only informed voters, says Chomsky, make good decisions, while the goal of the PR machinery is to misinform them and make them make irrational decisions. PR industry reached politics through a simple transformation of its primary function – commercial marketing, and commercial advertising was invented to undermine the market. The market, in our case, would be the government obtained in a democratic manner, then the media, up to the overall social discourse.



We are witnessing that, at the point of constructive debate in the “free space”, the Internet and all available communication platforms that are increasingly open (or consolidated) but undoubtedly highly positioned, instead of democratization, transparency and interactivity, we are experiencing extreme polarization. It is primarily political division, with a frequent tendency of extreme ideological division to the level of extreme catharsis and anxiety that leads to apathy and degradation of social discourse from an ethical and verbal point of view. That cannot be corrected, but it is heated, depending on the current topic and position of power. One topic heats up with another topic day after day, agendas are created from different spheres of life, and the new media, instead of an influential rectifier, turn into an affected field of discussion in which the “conversation between the deaf” actually echoes.

## Conclusion

The example of “Local Elections 2013” shows that the new information and communication media i.e., the Internet or social network formats, provide huge opportunities to reach the target audience (segmented public) and to offer special information contents to special electoral groups. Networked communication, the Internet, and above all, the social networks Facebook, Twitter, etc., use the option of multipliers by spreading rumors or following the “influential” creators of public opinion. With a dose of bias, we can say that the media are the first and last victims at the “battlefield” on which hate speech, disqualification, negativity and nihilism, lies and deception are fighting.

From the point of view of spreading hatred and stereotypes in another, equally important, if not more important social discourse (gender, sexual rights and freedoms, ethnic issues), the Macedonian example, and also numerous European experiences, show that homophobic hate speech is closely related to nationalist and ethnocentric speech and discourse. Individuals and groups that hate LGBTI persons are the same who do not tolerate other diversities, especially related to race, ethnicity and religion, disability, resistance to social inclusion for persons with disabilities, etc.

While in the first case of hate speech, as the ideal or presumed author, we strictly viewed politics and the desire for power and authority, in the second case blatant homophobia and stereotype-based hatred are involved, in addition to politics and other influential factors such as religion, tradition and established patriarchal values.

It is a serious social and ethical threat, especially since in this way their position in this sensitive discourse is framed as a “new gospel” or as part of a national, ethical axiom, which contains a mystical force of persuasion, threat, fear and punishment (against the national betrayal of liberalism, left-wing ideology, and their attack on traditional family values, religion, progeny, children ...). Once religion enters as an established dogma, then the space for critical thinking is extremely narrow. Religion and religious affiliation as one of the indisputable human rights is set against science i.e., they take the comfort of having a “claim” on the final truth.

And in practice, in fact, two different ideological positions are created: right-wing in determining what is “given by God” and anything different is a left-wing “blasphemy” which, according to them, is artificially imposed and additionally creates an emotional charge in the “orthodox”. They, in turn, in the case of homophobia (even inclusion of persons / children with special needs A/N) present themselves as victims of some kind of liberal propaganda. Perhaps the most effective reply to such social right-wing opinion would be the thought of the great Fyodor Dostoevsky from the “The Diary of a Writer” where he says: “You do not prove your common sense by locking your neighbor in a madhouse.”

What further obscures the ethical discourse is that religious conservatism is equally veiled under the guise of democracy and the right to freedom of speech, although it leaves behind a “bloody” trace of hate speech before it becomes an act of hate violence. What also stands out specifically in the anti-gender movements and right-wing populisms is the transfer of discussions from the political to the public sphere through social media, which gives them freedom of dissemination, impunity, and extreme virulence. Once again, politics is the author; the media become the narrator, and the meta-reader as the victim of the uttered hate speech.

Once we came to a conclusion that all this is happening to us strategically or against our will, the question legitimately arises how to “normalize” the debate space, while not violating the freedom of speech, the right to information and social inclusion? Is it sufficient to change the established ethical matrix and how, or which actors should be mobilized on the path of ethical cleansing of the Internet space?

Researchers in the psychology of social influence have been able to classify several ways in which persons can influence one another (Vasovic, M 2004 p. 250), through the power of coercion, the power of reward, legitimate power (obedience to authority), reference power (identification with others), expert power (superiority in knowledge) and information power, which depends on the persuasive power of the information available to a medium in the process of communication. The last type of power, in the new age of mass audiences (societies) has proven to be the most effective in controlling people’s opinion and behavior.

Once we have already concluded that in this “dirty game” of sowing discord between persons and radicalization of public discourse no one is innocent, neither among socio-political actors, nor in the media, nor in the general public as a recipient and interactor (accomplice) in creating lies and spreading hate speech, we can focus on the media and media literacy as possible carriers of positive ethical change.

What is the limit that cannot be crossed in media reporting will probably remain an eternal dilemma that will be debated for a long time. The media, willingly or not, find themselves caught between the right and the freedom of expression and transmission of information (which is one of the fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, property, human dignity) and current trends in political communication, in which Narcissism is prevalent, self-promotion in the best light against political rivals, at account of expressing malice, violence, evident manipulation, creating rumors and hate speech. There are almost no journalists or media that in their professional experience have not faced censorship (under pressure under a law or by other authority) or self-censorship (fear of taking responsibility for the consequences of a publicly spoken word). This is why the media often trample on the thin red line of ethics and ethical reporting, often coming into conflict with the interests of the media as a business, and the media as a means of information.

Most common solution in liberal democracies for such ethical dilemmas is the codes of ethics and professional codes of ethics in media, although world experiences in this field are diametrically opposed.

Hate speech specifically, which is most prevalent (visible or in hidden form), in the negative media coverage campaigns, there is open “freedom” and even protection in the United States, because their constitutional right puts the right to speech first, as priority right, although the price for such speech (hate speech) can be paid with the dignity, honor or inequality of the victim, or it is paid at a high price for the civilization of the public hearing or even with disturbed public peace (as already seen here). To the contrary, in Canada, Germany, Council of Europe members and in international law, hate speech is seen as more hateful than speech and does not prioritize freedom of speech over other values such as dignity, honor, equality, civilization, and public peace. (Beham, 2004: 165).

However, it is inevitable to note that there is a third current among theorists that speak of the ethics of negative campaigns. According to Katie Allen (Allen, 1996: 69) negative campaigning is an ethically sound way of communicating in the following ways of political communication: “if we are attacked, seriously threatened and have no other way to defend ourselves, if we have significantly less campaign funding than other political opponents, if we have unequivocally accurate information that a political opponent has done something wrong or if our opponent has done something really bad.” Hence the proponents of this theoretical “balance” conclude that a negative campaign does not always have to be morally unjustified, it can even be ethically justified, but only if it serves the truth and not lies, manipulations and fabrications i.e., if it is not abused.

In international law, this issue is resolved by the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1950, which, in Article 10, defines the freedom of expression, and its restriction, because “the use of those freedoms imposes obligations and responsibilities”. Speaking of media literacy, putting this topic on the “top agenda” as often and visibly as possible is one of the top priorities. The topic for discussion is just where and from whom to start? Young people are the first agents of change, given their power of absorption and the skills they have in mastering IT technologies, but not alone in that battle for social cohesion and the battle against disinformation and hate speech.

Media literacy and battle should start at an early age, both in formal and non-formal education. Whether it will start with high school students, in the upper classes or throughout the whole primary education, or even in the preschool age is just a field of discussion. Perhaps it is most logical as of the time they meet or are in initial contact with the media (usually electronic, smartphones, tablets, and computers). Evidently, the ability to detect eroding components in an ethical sense must be accompanied by appropriate vocabulary and age-appropriate tools. Through games, fun, creative content, all the way to open campaigns and establishing new learning models.

We have different experiences in such battles: A UNESCO study (UNESCO 2015,16) lists four initiatives against hate speech: an early warning system for recognizing hate speech, coordinating international coalitions, strengthening the response on social networks and Internet service providers, and promoting media literacy to prepare users to respond to hate speech. Considering that young people who are committed to combating hate speech can become the target of such campaigns young people in the so-called “counter speech”, should pay attention to their own safety.

Well-known internet campaigns against hate speech are No Hate Speech Movement part of the Pan-European movement started by the Council of Europe that aims to take an aggressive stance against cyberbullying, develop appropriate strategies and offer support to victims of hate speech; [www.jugend.support](http://www.jugend.support), youth platform focused on peer violence, etc.

Almost all contemporary authors dealing with this issue are unanimous that personalization of hate speech is needed as well as creation of individual learning agendas that will be inclusive and sustainable. If such digital (media) literacy system starts from local to central level, through interdisciplinary approach (throughout all forms and subjects of education), from primary to higher education level, only then will we reach the level of greater ethical cleansing and social cohesion.

# Limitations

From a communication, psychological and sociological point of view, social networks, in addition to free space, often have the function of “emptying” through debate and opposing views, but they are also a great mobilizing potential for closing ideological gaps on any social issues. On the other hand, they are a fertile ground for nurturing and radicalizing various stereotypes relating to most sensitive issues, which then widely reflects from the online to the offline space.

Evidently, despite their proven virulence, they are not the only carriers of public discourse contamination with hate speech. We are witnesses that all measurements of the extent of progress of the democratic processes and functions of the state show that there is a pronounced distrust in the institutions of the system, which is constantly fostered and upgraded by all above factors. In such conditions, when we have low trust and accumulated anxiety, undefined fear and constant uncertainty, it is very easy to mobilize the fear and concern of the careful public and to turn on the defense mechanisms and put into question everything that is new and unknown to the citizens as opposed to the established traditional order, comfort of what has already been seen, the past, instead of the challenging future. There is, however, a “hidden self-destructive factor” that is “read” in the claims of proponents of the “Videomalaise Theory” according to which “the ingrained practice of political communication, as carried out by the media and political consultants, prevents the engagement of citizens, which means “It reduces their knowledge of public affairs, reduces their trust in the government and adversely affects the level of political activism.”

In practice it happens again, human rights organizations are to address and alert institutions to hate speech as well as potential hate crimes at various times. However, as noted in the Report of the Subversive Front (Drndarevska, Atanasovska-2021), the prosecuting authorities neither over the last year nor in previous years have filed any charges of hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In the absence of case law and hate speech judgments, as a counter-effect, perpetrators and potential perpetrators are encouraged, and hence the increase in hate speech from year to year.

This, in turn, indicates that hate speech must still be regulated in terms of its criminalization, professional and ethical mapping and sanctioning (especially in media reporting through the Council of Media Ethics), and also at other levels. At the administrative level, social networks and the Internet are not fully regulated. The Audiovisual Services Agency (AVMS) has adopted a Guide to Monitoring “Hate Speech” which refers to European legislation, ie Recommendation CM / Rec (2011) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the new media concept, adopted on September 21, 2011 Which says:

*“The media should refrain from transmitting hate speech and other content that incites violence or discrimination for any reason. Special attention should be paid to entities working with collective online shared spaces designed to facilitate interactive mass communication.” (or mass communication in general). They should be careful when using and editing responses to expressions motivated by racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, misogynistic, sexist, or other prejudices. “Participants in the new media ecosystem may be required (by law) to report to the competent authorities criminal threats of violence based on racial, ethnic, religious, gender or other grounds that they become aware of.”*

... National law and practice in the field of hate speech should take appropriate measures regarding the role of the media in transmitting information and ideas that expose, analyze and explain specific cases of hate speech and the relevant phenomenon in general, such as and the right of the public to

receive such information and ideas. One of the most important differences that should be clearly expressed in national law and practice in order to make a clear distinction between the responsibility of the author of hate speech, on the one hand, and some responsibility of the media and media experts who contribute to the spread of as part of their mission to convey information and ideas on issues of public interest, on the other hand.

Self-regulation in the media sphere has a limited effect due to problems in the implementation of decisions, which is left to the professional capacity of the media, but there are certain protections in the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and the Criminal Code (Article 144) which states:

*“Anyone who, through an information system, threatens to commit a crime punishable by up to five years in prison or a more severe sentence, against a person because of his or her gender, race, skin color, class, or belonging to a marginalized group,” ethnic group, language, nationality, social origin, 21 religious beliefs, other beliefs, education, political affiliation, personal or social status, mental or physical disability, age, marital or marital status, property status, health status or any other grounds “provided by law or a ratified international agreement, shall be punished by imprisonment of one to five years.”*

The Code of Ethics of Journalists incorporates all these suggestions. However, the codes should state that the general obligation of journalists is to fight against media concentration, blackmail and the influence of advertisers and sponsors. To accept that writing itself and developing codes of ethics in media reporting (even laws) is a utopia and will initially change and “detoxify” the media sphere in our country from hate speech. It is a long, if not ambitious, historical process. We write history every day, with every text and publicly proclaimed word.

Despite the necessity of the legal “purification” of the digital space, in the Macedonian discourse there is a warning of the danger of „Hyperregulation as a means of control over media and academic freedom“ where the authors (Shishkovski. J, Lechevska. K 2015) in the conclusions warn:

*“Laws in the Republic of Macedonia that cover the media and education provide for numerous fines that serve as a means of controlling media and academic freedom. Media freedom is violated through direct interference with the programming and editorial policy. Numerous prescribed fines are an effective tool for controlling the media. Namely, only 2-3 fines for trivial errors in the minutes of the media program can lead to their bankruptcy or extinction. “That way, self-censorship is provided to the government, and if that fails, then the fine is an effective tool for silencing dissidents.”*

The harmonization of ethical rules in journalism and media begins with adoption of the Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The countries after becoming members of the Council of Europe ratify and incorporate the Convention into their domestic law. Following this international legal procedure, the citizens themselves, on the other hand, receive a legitimate right to protect their rights and freedoms, and be able to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. Hence, Article 10 of the Convention is of particular importance both for the media and citizens, which guarantees the freedom to receive and the freedom to disseminate information, except in specific cases where free expression of opinion phenomena occur that have fatal consequences for the life of individuals or groups.

This speaks not only of the need to implement positive experiences from outside (while waiting for the EU) through international conventions and national legislation, but also of the need to clean up primarily “our own backyard” of infected communication sites.

The steps will adhere to the following order: literate, detect, actualize and act.

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