



Guidelines

**→ for responsible
and safe ←**

**journalism
in times
of crisis**



PRO-FACT



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Pro-fact: Research, education, fact-check and debunk COVID-19 related disinformation narratives in Croatia

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Introduction

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In cooperation with the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) and the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists (TUCJ), Gong organized a series of targeted interviews with representatives of the journalistic profession in 2022, involving dozens of journalists of different ages and in various positions in the editorial offices of influential media. The aim was to conduct an in-depth study and analysis of journalistic work and the specific problems faced by the journalistic profession under the sudden, extremely crisis-like working conditions during the COVID -19 pandemic (followed by the war in Ukraine), and to develop guidelines and recommendations for responsible and safe journalism under crisis conditions.

Through discussions in focus groups with journalists, editors and members of the CJA Ethical Council (a body of HND that considers the application of the Ethical Code of Honor), the following was observed in the project of creating the Guidelines:

1. The worrying state of the Croatian media scene and the significant collapse of the journalistic profession even before the outbreak of the pandemic in terms of the introduction of certain working models - which in some cases worsened the already poor working conditions and standards.
2. The extremely unequal interest of publishers (media owners) in ensuring safe working conditions and supporting journalists who are particularly vulnerable in their work under crisis conditions.
3. The weaknesses of state institutions and special bodies formed in times of crisis - the so-called Crisis Headquarters: In the early stages of the crisis, journalists had problems because they could not move freely and it was difficult to work because of the lack of transparent and accountable information and because high-quality information was often not available and was not distributed evenly, i.e. "equally for all"
4. The increasing prevalence of misinformation-primarily due to a lack of understanding of what is "scientific," what is a reasoned critique of "scientific," or how to present sources that have an "opinion" on certain health topics.

An Overview of the Situation in Croatian Journalism at the Time of the Outbreak of the Crisis



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Interlocutors in the focus groups warned about the deterioration of journalists' working conditions in most media. Newsrooms are getting smaller, especially in digital media, journalists are increasingly overworked, a "universal journalist" is sought, specialization is not allowed, fewer and fewer people go onto the field, publishers are not interested in investing in investigative journalism, journalists often resort to passing information to each other and taking it from others - which also poses a risks of a domino effect of passing on misinformation

"... you get the message that everyone has it but us. So, under the pressure that "everybody has it," you don't have time to check it at all. You just publish it and everyone is happy because it generates clicks. Like, we won't be the first to publish it, but if someone has already published something, we have to publish it too. It doesn't matter if it turns out later that it's not true. At that moment, the pressure is on us that we have to have it because others have it," is how one of the respondents in the focus group describes the pressure of working on news portals.

"There is not enough journalists and editors, and this is because there is no money," says another respondent.

Many journalists are demotivated by insecurity and low salaries, so they abandon the basic postulates of journalism, they no longer want to take "risks" for the public interest. Moreover, self-censorship is becoming more common, or they leave the profession and look for work in other industries.

"Journalists fear for their own existence. Sometimes you cannot afford to go against the owner and the editor because then you lose your job, and you need money to survive. Sometimes you are forced to go against your beliefs in order to survive," admits one of the focus group participants.

Many spoke of more subtle methods of censorship and pressure from owners and editors as well as politics, but also from large advertisers (which is consistent with our findings from Gong's pilot study "[Who is pressuring journalists and how: From politicians to advertisers](#)").

And there was talk about the specific avoidance of critical texts about health professionals in crisis. “Some were afraid to write against certain people or institutions because they will need this hospital at some point,” said one of the journalists, cautioning about the problem of accepting corrupt models for health care functioning and the fear that journalists who wrote critically about medical staff would be treated differently from those who wrote in a friendlier tone.

While a significant portion of focus group respondents believe that we have seen a significant regression in journalism over the past decade—due to a lack of interest on the part of publishers to invest in professional quality journalism, and due to increasing pressure from the dominant political power centers and major advertisers—some respondents believe that there has been a “renaissance of investigative journalism” in the last seven years, but that there may still be problems due to the strengthening of individual private entrepreneurs who influence the way they are written about through advertising.

What are the biggest threats to journalism?



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Most interviewees mentioned the growing problem of pressure from advertisers, both large private companies and the government through ministries, as well as various forms of surreptitious advertising. Certain advertising models that are becoming increasingly dominant in the Croatian media space - such as conferences organised by media owners and editorial offices together with companies and state institutions, as well as native ads - are pathologically changing the fundamental task of journalism: timely and independent information.

SLAPP suits (Strategic lawsuit against public participation) were also considered an exceptional threat, and the CJA recorded their increase compared to the previous year (according to the CJA's March 2022 survey of 26 media outlets, 951 lawsuits were active, and prosecutors sued media owners and journalists for HRK 77.4 million). These are lawsuits that significantly affect the work of newsrooms and individual journalists - because they lead to self-censorship (or avoidance of issues related to those vulnerable to lawsuits in order to avoid lengthy and arduous litigation and financial payments), and legislators are not solving the problem of SLAPP suits.

“In some newsrooms, journalists are pressured to include a clause that the employment contract can be terminated if the journalist loses the dispute,” warned one of the focus group participants.

The problem of local media in the function of promoting the work of local public enterprises is particularly emphasized in the discussions. Through years of funding, most local media outlets turned into auxiliary PR tools of the local powerful people, and instead of critical discourse toward the local government and independent reporting, PR texts presented as “news” became dominant. “For the 30 years we are witnessing systematic destruction of local media and their unification by the powerful people and tycoons, primarily associated with the HDZ,” said one of the respondents. Due to the poor funding model, local media were also particularly threatened during the first phase of the pandemic: low wages became even lower and some colleagues were laid off.

In addition, it was noted that state-owned enterprises, which are important advertisers in many media, are not questioned. This question was the subject of the Gong's research [“Državno financiranje bez jasnih kriterija - alat za cenzuriranje medija?”](#) (“State funding without clear criteria - an instrument for censorship of the media?”), prepared and conducted by award-winning journalist and Editor Saša Paparella together with Oriana Ivković Novokmet and Melisa Skender.

Specific threats to journalists were also discussed, just as health problems due to pressure in the newsroom, from senior editors and management, but also “from the outside,” from those being written about to the anonymous audience via social networks. The position of journalists in society is degraded and journalists are often exposed to insults and threats, from the top of politics to ordinary citizens or various Associations or informal groups. During the pandemic, they were particularly targeted by citizen groups who opposed the officially mandated pandemic response measures. Some journalists were not only subjected to threats - with several physical attacks recorded - but their families were also attacked via social networks. Also, in order to be able to research freely on site, some editorial offices were forced to hire security guards.

The crisis conditions have once again highlighted the lack of adequate media education for citizens, showing how much the position of the journalistic profession as the “guardian of democracy,” i.e., its fundamental task of transmitting and analyzing verified information, is misunderstood.

JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

More and more information consumers are coming to content via social networks, losing the ability to get a full or more comprehensive picture - they only see the information that interests them, and very often they can not even distinguish which content is “journalism” and which is not. The problem of primary “informing” via social networks without an understanding of the need to verify the source and authenticity of the information was particularly pronounced at the time of the Covid 19 pandemic and has severely shaken the basic missions of journalism. Most focus group participants believe that it is important to expand media literacy programmes to overcome this problem, but also to significantly strengthen mechanisms to continuously educate all generations about the role of journalism and the distinction between information and disinformation. However, numerous interlocutors also warned of the responsibility of the media themselves, that there are more and more signs that they are not coping with the social changes, that they do not know how to present the content in the social networks, that they should use more new tools, but also graphic presentation models that are more in line with the trends. It has also been warned that many media outlets are losing not only audiences but also trust because of the uncritical attitude toward the centers of political power and advertisers, as well as surreptitious advertising. The problem is not only the uncritical adoption of unverified information from social networks, but also the uncritical adoption of “information” from the media that has been created through various forms of surreptitious advertising or collusion with government representatives.

THE PENETRATION OF DISINFORMATION INTO THE MEDIA

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the weakened profession of journalism to resist the intrusion of misinformation. Digital media, with its emphasis on the speed of journalism, is investing less and less in verifying the truth of news (from PR to posts on social media), but the problem is becoming more apparent in the structure of the media: media owners are not looking for editors who insist on high professional standards and verification of information circulating in the public space. Instead, they are increasingly looking for editors willing to meet the demands of advertisers and powerful politicians, with whom various arrangements are made (e.g., conferences on individual areas of public policy, where the holders of political power present their policies in the best light, the media ensure their visibility, and public and private companies offer sponsorships through which they improve their image but also secure the favor of the authorities).

Interlocutors in the focus groups rated disinformation published by journalists as more dangerous than disinformation published by non-journalists - because disinformation spread by the media undermines the very idea of journalism and helps to further deepen distrust in journalism.

“It is absolutely true that the mainstream media plays a major role in spreading misinformation. Everyone is responsible for it. Serious foreign media have fact-checking departments that check texts and verify information, while our media do not even have proofreaders. However, I believe that not all responsibility can lie with the media, even if they have the necessary information. We need to look at the media sector as a whole, together with the public, and then design coordinated interventions through a systematic media policy,” said one of the interviewees in the focus groups.

Some have warned that many media outlets do not have sufficient resources to review information in detail, and during the pandemic they began to rely on “experts, scientific authorities, etc.”-but this also proved ineffective, as experts’ opinions often changed and confused the public. The problem of the lack of science journalists who know how to communicate information from the scientific field to the general public was highlighted. As an example of best practice, the publication of news from the world’s media, known for seriously vetting everything they publish, was highlighted.

“We publish information from reliable media such as the BBC or the New York Times. We do not have the resources to check it elsewhere, and we know that these media have their own fact checkers and we rely on their information,” said one of the focus group participants.

Thus, in talking to journalists and editors, a variety of problems in the journalistic profession were noted, which were drastically exacerbated during the sudden crisis in which the entire society was forced to function according to new, specific “rules.”

Already during the height of the crisis, European journalists’ associations engaged in a series of recommendations and practical advice for journalists*, which we also recommend on this occasion, but our intention was to define, based on the analysis of the problems prevailing in Croatia, specific guidelines and recommendations for journalists, editorial offices, but also media publishers and competent state institutions, and especially for the Ministry of Culture and Media.

* [The recommendations and practical advice relate to safety in pandemic reporting, the state of journalistic safety during the pandemic COVID -19, the ethics of reporting in war zones, preparing for health and safety risks in reporting, greater involvement of media owners in protecting staff and identifying and combating disinformation.](#)

Guidelines

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1. SAFETY AT WORK, CARE FOR YOUR OWN HEALTH

- ▶ Every journalist must take care of his or her health and adequate working conditions, but also resolutely require the responsible editor and media publishers the provision of adequate working conditions and/or protective equipment. Although there are legal obligations to ensure safe working conditions and specific rules were in place during the pandemic (from mandatory wearing of masks to maintaining social distance, etc.), along with the indication that working from home is also possible - not all media publishers were equally responsible when it came to ensuring the same quality of working conditions.
- ▶ Newsrooms are required to provide the highest level of support and professional assistance to all journalists reporting on particularly sensitive issues in crisis situations or researching problems that may lead to personal danger.
- ▶ In the event that the media publisher does not provide adequate working conditions, it is necessary to warn the public about it (individually or through journalists' associations, CJA, Union, etc.) and to initiate procedures to sanction those who behave irresponsibly.

2. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

- ▶ The bodies that make decisions and instructions for the functioning of society in times of crisis must immediately point out the specific position of journalists and give them free passage regardless of possible restrictions on their movement, obliging journalists to wear clearly visible signs of the journalistic profession.
- ▶ Editors must clearly and responsibly analyze all risks associated with operating under crisis conditions. In cooperation with media owners, they must responsibly ensure safe conditions for work outside of the newsroom and respect any specific wishes of journalists who, for health or similar reasons, in certain crisis conditions cannot work in field.
- ▶ Journalists doing the most demanding research tasks under crisis/risky conditions should be especially insured (from providing physical protection in the field to insurance policies).

3. EQUAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR ALL JOURNALISTS

- ▶ Despite the formal legal framework guaranteeing journalists equal access to information in the event of a pandemic, it became apparent that the established body (Crisis Headquarters) was for the most part unable to provide timely and clear information on the course of the crisis, and the relevant ministries and institutions (Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Health, etc.) often failed to provide concrete answers to more specific inquiries. The pandemic has highlighted the unwillingness of the state apparatus to communicate equally with all media. The crisis situation has led to greater involvement of PR agencies and so-called communications consultants, but they have failed to provide timely and high-quality information to the public.
- ▶ Journalists in crisis conditions must warn even more decisively and loudly about cases of deviations in exercising the right to access to information - the public must know what information is being withheld or is incomplete.

4. STRENGTHENING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF JOURNALISTS

- ▶ Everything published in the media should be true, and sources should be verified. But due to the long-term deterioration of the quality of work in the media, the problem of easy/light penetration of misinformation was already present before the crisis, i.e. the outbreak of the pandemic, and the crisis has made it even more visible.
- ▶ Crisis conditions, however, should raise awareness of the application of the profession's ethical principles, and editors - with the support of media publishers - should insist on maximally responsible journalism: verification of sources, clear presentation of journalistic work (without manipulative headlines or the like).
- ▶ Promoting Journalists Code of Honor, encourage media owners and editors to promote the values of the Code of Honor and incorporate them into daily editorial work.
- ▶ Given the increasing warnings from journalists that editors do not ask for verification of information because of the struggle for clicks or the imperative of speed and "attractiveness," i.e., that they suggest ignoring it, it should be remembered that a journalist has the right to refuse a journalistic assignment that violates the ethical principles of the profession, but this option is rarely used for fear of sanctions. It is therefore obvious that the newsrooms must be legally strengthened, i.e. the position of journalists vis-à-vis the business part of the media (which the CJA also advocates in the context of the amendments to the Media Act).
- ▶ Media publishers must ensure a sufficient number of journalists in the newsrooms to enable high-quality and professional fulfillment of journalistic tasks - "savings" that lead to the collapse of professional standards are inadmissible.
- ▶ When an editor or media publisher forces a journalist to do unethical work, models must be developed to alert the public to these deviations. What is also needed is independent oversight of the Media act, which protects editors from such pressures.

5. PUBLISHING CONTENT FROM THE SOCIAL NETWORKS

- ▶ In crisis situations, particular caution is required when publishing posts from social networks, as social networks prove to be a particularly risky mechanism for spreading misinformation or distorted information.
- ▶ Journalists are obliged to verify all the information they publish, but due to the volume of work, the need for speed, etc., especially in digital media, the increasingly prevalent practice is to take posts from a person's profile when it is public, without contacting the person who posted something, but also without the aforementioned verification - because the person who posted something on social networks is considered a "source". Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that such a procedure violates the professional standards of journalism: Announcements by celebrities marked as "public" should also be scrutinised like any other statement in the public sphere and should not be published in the media without additional scrutiny, contextualization, or journalistic clarification in accordance with the journalistic profession's Code of Ethics.

6. THE CRISIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT JOURNALISTS MUST REMAIN SILENT

- ▶ The exceptional conditions under which journalistic freedoms are restricted are precisely defined by law (Media Act, General Principles, Article 3). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic the Croatian media scene was exposed to various informal assessments of what journalists should and should not “ask”. Also, it was suggested that the body set up by the Government to implement crisis measures should not be questioned. On the contrary: journalists, as representatives of the public, must question the actions of the Government and government agencies established to address crisis issues and demand accurate and timely information.
- ▶ A time of crisis is not a time of abstinence from critical or investigative journalism. Even the most sensitive topics should be investigated and questioned, but with maximum responsibility.
- ▶ If a media publisher or editor asks a journalist to “refrain” from critical journalism because of crisis-ridden working conditions - the public should also be informed about this via journalists’ associations or individually.

7. CAREFUL USE OF SOURCES AND AUTHORITIES IN THE INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTS

- ▶ During the COVID-19 pandemic journalism faced the specific problem of lack of qualified interlocutors, scientists or experts from certain medical fields who could responsibly interpret certain problems and make recommendations to citizens. At the same time, various interpretations emerged in the public space, especially on social media, signed and aggressively promoted and advocated by different scientists. However, not every scientist is an expert in every field. Also, the fact that someone is a scientist in one field is no guarantee that he/she is a desirable interlocutor for another field
- ▶ Journalists are advised to talk to an expert on a particular topic who is a scholar on that topic
- ▶ The emergence of conspiracy theorists is a journalistic issue, but with clarification of context and a clear distinction between what is scientific and what is quasi-scientific
- ▶ It is recommended that newsrooms work with experts on the distinction between scientific/non-scientific and conspiracy theories, as needed, to determine at the editorial level who are qualified experts in a particular area, and that journalistic associations organize expert meetings and workshops on the subject.

8. EXISTENTIAL SECURITY OF JOURNALISTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

- ▶ The existential threat, the insecurity of salaries and/or fees became particularly evident under crisis conditions, additionally warning of a particularly poor model of financing local media, which should play an important role in informing the public under crisis conditions, but also of the possibility of manipulation and blackmail through the threat of being left “without a salary” - for all media, regardless of the size and strength of the media publisher
- ▶ It is necessary to strengthen the understanding that timely and quality information is a “public good” and to strengthen the position of journalism both in Europe and in Croatia, as well as to promote models for financing professional and quality journalism from public sources
- ▶ Models for funding quality journalism from public sources that are not subject to the influence of the ruling political elite should be improved
- ▶ It is necessary to strengthen the position of journalists in the Croatian media scene, to promote good examples of professional journalism and to support newsrooms and media publishers that adhere to the Code of Ethics of the journalism profession
- ▶ The dignity of the journalistic profession must be strengthened by promoting media culture, i.e. understanding the position of the media and the journalistic profession as an essential pillar of liberal democracy - for which it is necessary to regulate the legal framework, but also to initiate broad educational mechanisms

About the project

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The Project **‘Pro-fact: Research, education, fact-check and debunk COVID-19 related disinformation narratives in Croatia’** is tackling disinformation related to COVID-19 on multiple levels by a multidisciplinary and intersectional approach. Through research, awareness raising, and capacity-building methods, the project comprehensively approaches the social, political, and health problem of spreading disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19. Through its activities, it seeks to effectively identify Croatian COVID-19 disinformation campaigns, strengthen the capacity of the Croatian multidisciplinary team to detect and counter disinformation campaigns, and increase the media literacy of Croatian journalists and the public. The coordinator of the project is Gong, while the partner organizations are: the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, The University of Dubrovnik, Faktograf.hr, and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing.

About the author

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Durdica Klancir, journalist, editor and political commentator, has been present in the Croatian media scene for more than thirty years. She has been editor-in-chief at three influential media outlets: the political weekly Globus, Business.hr and tportal. She wrote in Polet, Globus, Poslovni dnevnik, Business.hr, tportal, Net.hr and cooperated with Deutsche Welle. She mainly investigates corruption and nepotism and advocates independent and uncompromising journalism in her public appearances. In 2019, she was elected Journalist of the Year by the members of CJA. She has served as president of CJA's Honorary Journalists Council and is currently a member. She holds a degree in Political Science from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb and, in addition to her journalistic work, teaches the Digital Journalism course at the University of Vrn. On the proposal of HND, she was elected as a member of the Parliamentary Committee on Information, Computerisation and the Media in 2021.



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GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE AND SAFE JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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