

MEDIA COVERAGE AND ITS DETERMINANTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:

This study covers the issue of information dissemination. Along with recognising this topic in the social epistemology framework, the authors aim to identify and analyse the circumstances and significant factors that determine it in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They uncover certain risks in terms of achieving the very objectives of disseminating information via the media. In the first part, the authors outline the process's essence and nature, but also its social value in the current pandemic situation. They make a particular reference to the role of journalism, or rather journalists in their specific professional and personal circumstances (broader and global communication ecology that concerns the pandemic with a direct news cycle, or social media and layman media practices and, for example, also the financing issues or insecurity of the profession, economic conditions, etc.). In the second part, they identify the determining factors influencing media coverage – its technological context – space and time, but also ethical and noetic factors related to journalists. They draw attention to relations and interactions that shape the specific character of media-disseminated information and bring risks ('information explosion' in society, including "(dis)infodemic", the professional noetic crisis in connection with the crisis of relevant concepts in journalism and the quality of journalists' work, but also the ethical crisis in the context of non-ethical interests and relations in the media (ideological, political, economic), journalists' personal moral failures and their own neglect of epistemic (cognitive) training in the context of professional practice, etc.) for the public, concerning its aim to contribute to the reduction of social uncertainty, fear, risk of fear and panic, or to the correct and ethical judgement and action of the public at the time of the pandemic.

KEY WORDS:

COVID-19, disinformation, hoax, infodemic, journalism, media-disseminated information, pandemic, truth

1 Introduction

The media have always been and still are understood to be a significant source of important information, news and knowledge that help people orientate, make decisions and take certain steps in life. They allow

people to maintain social stability in everyday life. People, the members of society, expect and demand media to convey information and, naturally, this expectation is intensified at a time of social crises or emergencies. It is obvious in this perspective that the existing situation of the global pandemic of COVID-19, causing an unprecedented social threat and biological catastrophe, along with serious human, social and economic damage,¹ has become the focus of attention of the media and journalists that inform the people about it.

In the following text, we focus our attention on the issue of information dissemination in the context of the COVID-19 disease. Along with recognising this topic in its complex social and epistemological framework, we intend to identify and analyse the significant factors that determine it in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first part of our study, we will outline not only the problem's nature and essence, but also certain specific circumstances or aspects of 'pandemic journalism'. In the second part, we will focus our attention on identification and an analysis of (selected) significant factors as determinants of information dissemination through the media, with the perspective of finding the context and dynamics of relations. Here, we will identify certain risks that may interfere with its purposes – to reduce social uncertainty, fear and risk of fear and panic at the time of the pandemic, or help the public take the correct and ethical stand during the pandemic.

2 Mediated Information and Its Social and Epistemological Aspect in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The main role of media and the mission of journalists serving the public and democracy, from the pragmatic point of view, is to offer and explain what is needed and useful to society.² Media reporting should express, stabilise and protect the social system with its values and standards. The media are concerned with maintaining a certain social order, acceptable social behaviour, understanding the values, norms and symbols in a given cultural surrounding. Eventually, the role of media is to establish the much needed (ontologically) safe space for us by spreading information.³ In this perspective, mere informing is, in fact, even 'more important' than informing objectively in a strictly (traditional) epistemological sense.⁴

1 Remark by authors: As the authors state, WHO defines the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a serious global threat. As was estimated in the 2017 World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report, global risks are interlinked. See: CINELLI, M. et al: The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic. In *Scientific Reports*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 16598, p. 1-10. [online]. [2022-01-01]. Available at: <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.pdf?origin=ppub>>.

2 GÁLIK, S.: Média a pravda. K epistemologickému problému mediálneho informovania. In GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S., MARCHEVSKÝ, O., ŠPIRKO, D. (eds.): *Pravda. Teoretické a praktické kontexty*. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2018, p. 165-166.

3 PEREIRA, J. A. V., CORREIA, J. C.: Between Facts and News: Journalism, Common Sense Knowledge and Public Sphere. In *Estudos em Comunicação*, 2007, No. 1, p. 307-311. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<http://www.ec.ubi.pt/ec/01/pdfs/correia-joao-vizeu-alfredo-between-facts-and-news.pdf>>.

4 Remark by authors: As S. Gálik explains, it is not primarily about information dissemination of epistemologically high (a hundred per cent) value. See: GÁLIK, S.: Média a pravda. K epistemologickému problému mediálneho informovania. In GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S., MARCHEVSKÝ, O., ŠPIRKO, D. (eds.): *Pravda. Teoretické a praktické kontexty*. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2018, p. 165-166. The context of such an attitude towards the nature of information dissemination can theoretically be explained also in the concept of "identified crises" of the traditional understanding of relevant terms in journalism and its ethics – facts, truth and reality. As S. J. A. Ward points out, these terms have been impaired. Various academic critical theories of news media have declared these terms to be debatable. There are discussions and scholarly articles, in the context of epistemology and journalism, about what kinds of news may be considered to be truthful. T. H. Bivins points out that the concept of "telling the truth" is subject to changes both in definition and function. We cannot find the only definition of the truth and criteria of truthfulness that would be accepted by all philosophical schools and theories. Theorists today agree with the idea that there is no such thing as the absolute truth. Despite the fact that people working in the media want to achieve this ideal goal, there are actually very few instances of indisputable truth. Similarly problematic is the term "objectivity". There are many people concerned with the concept of "objectivity", with results just as problematic as the very traditional concept of truth. Professionals in media and journalism realise that there is a need to reformulate the theory of truth and objectivity for the needs of media and journalism. See and compare: WARD, S. J. A.: Journalism Ethics. In WAHL-JORGENSEN, K., HANTZSCH, T. (eds.): *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 301-304; WARD, A. J. S.: Truth and Objectivity. In WILKINS, L., CHRISTIANS, G. C. (eds.): *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*. New York, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 71-83; HEARNS-BRANAMAN, O. J.: *Journalism and the Philosophy of Truth. Beyond Objectivity and Balance*. New York, London: Routledge, 2016; BIVINS, H. T.: *Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations, and Journalism*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004; MUÑOZ-TORRES, J. R.: Truth and Objectivity in Journalism: Anatomy of an Endless Misunderstanding.

On the other hand, truthfulness is still understood to be an important quality of informing both on the sides of broadcasters or media professionals and recipients,⁵ and (despite various epistemological shifts) it is still generally believed in the possibility of objective and truthful reporting, in the possibility to retrieve the pure truth. In this context, also in the objective and truthful informing. It is possible to state that this is also the reason why the public is questioning the truthfulness of the messages communicated by media. As also V. Semir mentions, the majority of people naturally tend to believe the information that is published and take it as the absolute and objective truth. People simply think that the press, radio and television are guarantors of the truth, independent of anything; they believe that a reporter mediates the indisputable reality that is based on a fact. However, the idea that when something is published, advertised or announced, it is necessarily objective and true is believed not only by the ordinary people. This concept is generally accepted even by journalists.⁶

V. Semir explains that recipients perceive the presented information as objective and absolute truths chiefly since this information is communicated in a specific, purely black-and-white way. This makes it seem the absolute and indisputable truth.⁷ However, the tendency to regard news as the absolute and indisputable truth is here also because journalists are believed to be the administrators of the traditional sociocultural role of spokespersons and guardians of the truth regarding public affairs since they have a very good understanding of social reality. The public simply expects journalists to be perfectly objective and truthful when they present information and news because they are meant to be public authorities. Once information is published by such authorities, it is understood to be guaranteed, verified and confirmed.⁸ This inclination is also the result of the fact that the public needs to feel safe – we need ontological security, which is something that media seem to be able to offer. This need naturally grows at a time of social crisis, or during a state of emergency.

In its facilitating role, journalism is supposed to monitor or observe in order to obtain relevant information about public affairs, conditions, trends and treats within society. In this context, journalists should share important information with the public. This information should be precise and verified. It is necessary to understand that journalists have an important role in society as they may influence the decisions of the public at the time of crisis.⁹ Keeping this responsibility in mind, it is the norm for journalists to describe events as adequately and truthfully as possible. As L. A. Day points out, if the media do not provide truthful, precise and meaningful information, they deprive their recipients of the intellectual nutrition that is needed for a rational decision-making process.¹⁰

It is natural that during the COVID-19 crisis the social demand for media coverage increases and the same happens with the social expectation of truthful, reliable and up-to-date information. Media, especially the public service media, are requested to provide relevant and reliable news coverage in newspapers, on television and radio, so that the public does not lose track and is able to act accordingly. If the media did not cover information related to the pandemic, they would invoke uncertainty, fear, anxiety and thus put people's ontological safety at stake.¹¹ If media coverage was inadequate in terms of the truthfulness of information, they could also directly or indirectly endanger the health and lives of people. Therefore, the effort for correct,

In *Journalism Studies*, 2012, Vol. 13, No. 4, p. 566-582; MARAS, S.: *Objectivity in Journalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013; SHOEMAKER, J. P., REESE, D. S.: *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. New York: Longman, 1996, p. 4.

5 ŠEFCÁK, L.: O pravdivosti v novinárstve (otázka etiky alebo práva). In *Otázky žurnalistiky*, 1997, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 23-32.

6 See: SEMIR, V.: Scientific Journalism: Problems and Perspectives. In *International Microbiology*, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 125-128; MODRZEJEWSKI, A.: Deficit of Truth in Mass Media and its Consequence for Political and International Sphere. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MAGÁL, S. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media. Media Farm – Totems and Taboo*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2015, p. 105-106.

7 Remark by author: In the context of Semir's explanation, we can also mention this: As far as the recipients are concerned, the so-called facts seem to be objective – relatively independent from the motives and attitudes of the informers, whose subjective intentions they may also often contradict. They inform to certain extent – apparently depending on the situation and position the recipients are in. L. Šečák explains, together with M. Hysk. See: ŠEFCÁK, L.: O pravdivosti v novinárstve (otázka etiky alebo práva). In *Otázky žurnalistiky*, 1997, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 25.

8 Compare to: SEMIR, V.: Scientific Journalism: Problems and Perspectives. In *International Microbiology*, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 125-128. Speaking of verification, journalists check the credibility or validity of reports. At the same time, they declare their ability to objectively analyse reality. In fact, it is verification that gives a journalist the right to claim a special place in society and stand for authority. See: HERMIDA, A.: Tweets and Truth: Journalism as a Discipline of Collaborative Verification. In *Journalism Practice*, 2012, Vol. 6, No. 5-6, p. 659-668.

9 PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 977.

10 DAY, L. A.: *Ethics in Media Communication. Cases and Controversies*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2006, p. 26-83.

11 Remark by authors: "Lack of information leads to lack of safety", the authors explain. See: PEREIRA, J. A. V., CORREIA, J. C.: Between Facts and News: Journalism, Common Sense Knowledge and Public Sphere. In *Estudos em Comunicação*, 2007, No. 1, p. 307-311. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<http://www.ec.ubi.pt/ec/01/pdfs/correia-joao-vizeu-alfredo-between-facts-and-news.pdf>>.

fair and to a certain degree truthful and meaningful information provided by media and journalists is indeed a relevant norm during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with H. Macleod, we can state that the basic values of journalism – the importance of accuracy, facts and transparency – have become vital for people in a way that is rarely seen in modern times.¹²

As M. F. Perreault and G. P. Perreault point out, journalism, or journalists, serve as a communication channel, disseminating information between public officials, experts and the broad public. It is possible to say here that news organisations constitute a COVID-19 pandemic communication ecosystem. In order for journalists to be helpful, they use formal, professional, but also informal and personal means. They work hard to bring what they feel their recipients need. For example, they bring something extra, trying to serve a particular community in a complex way. At the time of the pandemic crisis, they provide information to the community and thus influence it, but the community also considerably influences their work.¹³ However, it is necessary to notice in this context that it is not solely professional journalism that constitutes the world of media dealing with news and information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is also the world of ‘alternative’ media, brought by the Internet.

It is quite true that there are not only media professionals – journalists – that keep the public informed about the pandemic, but also ordinary Internet users who enter the global media space on a daily basis.¹⁴ There are mediators who produce various blocks of information, virtual communities, as well as political parties, foundations, automated systems, governments, but also trolls. These are all parts of the communication ecosystem that exists at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ It is possible to say this pandemic reveals the critical role of providing information in a direct news cycle.¹⁶ As N. Newman said in his description of the nature of the digital era, journalists do not control access to information anymore. Contrary to official advice, with a massive usage of social media, people seem to find more sources of information that include “alternative facts” that may be misleading or false.¹⁷

As outlined earlier, journalists are dealing in these circumstances not only with COVID-19 itself, but also with their own personal challenges. According to M. F. Perreault and G. P. Perreault, we may notice how performing the role of journalists in the communication ecosystem of the COVID-19 pandemic also reflects their desire to manage the present overload of information that many existing sources offer,¹⁸ while research still proves that they have a problem to get relevant data. They struggle while trying to obtain information (e.g., the number of infected people, or the number of deaths actually related to COVID-19); moreover, access to the hospital may be difficult as well. They are aware of the fact that they provide information that does not go to the depth and is probably inadequate.¹⁹ Some journalists, M. F. Perreault and G. P. Perreault notice, try to be proactive and use certain innovative practices to compensate for the lack of consistent and reliable information. However, this flexibility and innovative approach that makes some of the traditional practices to a certain degree inferior is overshadowed by various problems that they face, particularly problems with access

12 MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2021, p. 34.

13 PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 977-979.

14 More on this, for example here: GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S.: Media and Truth in the Perspective of the Practice and Life Form of the Modern “Homo Medialis”. In *Communication Today*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 5-19.

15 Remark by authors: As it turns out, sometimes their information elements are only spread through pictures that are perceived by the recipients as visually meaningful. These elements are usually meant to arouse emotions, feelings and reactions that incite an immediate response. See: PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf/>>.

16 CINELLI, M. et al: The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic. In *Scientific Reports*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 16598, p. 1-10. [online]. [2022-01-01]. Available at: <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.pdf?origin=ppub>>.

17 MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2021, p. 34.

18 PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 987.

19 Remark by authors: As the title of the study suggests – Metajournalistic Discourse as a Stabilizer within the Journalistic Field: Journalistic Practice in the COVID-19 Pandemic – the authors were interested in the role of metajournalistic discourse as a stabilising element in journalism. See: PANČOCHÁŘOVÁ, N., MACKOVÁ, V.: *Metažurnalistický diskurz jako stabilizátor žurnalistiky v době pandemie COVID-19*. Released on 11th October 2021. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<https://www.infomore.cz/news-detail/cs/60-metazurnalisticky-diskurz-jako-stabilizator-zurnalistiky-v-dobe-pandemie-covid-19/>>. More on this: PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G., MAARES, P.: Metajournalistic Discourse as a Stabilizer within the Journalistic Field: Journalistic Practice in the COVID-19 Pandemic. In *Journalism Practice*, 2022, Vol. 16, No. 2-3, p. 365-383.

to information. Yet, inadequate access to information was a serious problem even before the pandemic. It has been impairing the processes in journalism for some time now, and is even more visible now, at the time of the pandemic.²⁰

It seems that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, some journalists failed to notice the emerging uncertainty in the sector of public health due to a lack of experience. However, they all realised the necessity to relieve the anxiety among the public through informing, regardless of the need to face their own personal challenges. There are some serious problems in media, such as reduced financial resources, job insecurity, challenges introduced by forced home officing (inability to use the graphical interpretation) and similar.²¹

It is finally possible to notice in this context that the COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge for journalists,²² who respond to it both as individuals – in a manner that is similar to other people’s response – and as professionals, providing information. We believe that this role is determined by various interacting factors that finally shape its specific character. In the following part, we will focus on some selected significant factors. We will identify certain risky phenomena, considering also the dynamic relations found between them that endanger achieving the very goal of information dissemination, i.e., to contribute to the correct and ethical judgement and actions seen in the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 On Determinants of Media Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic

We believe that media coverage of the pandemic disease COVID-19 has certain aspects or relevant factors. We will identify the factors of space and time, but also ethics and noetics in such media coverage. These factors determine and shape a specific character of informing because they interrelate and interact with each other. We believe that it is necessary to analyse and assess them, respecting this correlation.

The first factor in any media coverage is placement. We may state that in the case of this pandemic, we are talking about a global social and health threat, covered by the media across the globe. Media and journalists try to collect and share information worldwide, using information and communication technologies. The global scale of media coverage is possible thanks to the global sharing of information relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic by all the affected countries (that is, all countries around the world). We share the newest scientific findings and medical information, as well as political and organisational measures that are available to fight or at least slow down the disease. Media coverage promotes a planetwide cooperation practice in the field of science and medicine, or ‘pandemic management’ at various levels and thus may contribute to mitigating or eliminating the pandemic. However, the uncoordinated flow of information poses a risk. We are witnessing a rapid increase in the amount of information, *de facto* information overflow. As pointed out by M. Cinelli et al., the unprecedented amount of information is multiplied by global users of the Internet or, more specifically, social media.²³

20 Remark by authors: This innovation is apparently not such a novelty, since the authors mention it results from the work of those of journalists who are interested in practices concerning the well-known key principles in journalism. See: PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 978-987.

21 Remark by authors: Research has shown that the news coverage was gradually normalised several months after the spread of the pandemic, as the result of complex journalistic experience of covering other (types of) crises and disasters. See: PANČOCHÁŘOVÁ, N., MACKOVÁ, V.: *Metažurnalistický diskurz jako stabilizátor žurnalistiky v době pandemie COVID-19*. Released on 11th October 2021. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<https://www.infomore.cz/news-detail/cs/60-metazurnalisticky-diskurz-jako-stabilizator-zurnalistiky-v-dobe-pandemie-covid-19/>>; HUDÍKOVÁ, Z., PRAVDOVÁ, H., BLAHÚT, D.: Post-Lockdown Metamorphoses of Television Culture. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 96.

22 Remark by authors: It seems that COVID-19 has not only added new problems for journalists to solve, but also multiplied the already existing ones. See: PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 987; PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G., MAARES, P.: Metajournalistic Discourse as a Stabilizer within the Journalistic Field: Journalistic Practice in the COVID-19 Pandemic. In *Journalism Practice*, 2022, Vol. 16, No. 2-3, p. 365-383.

23 CINELLI, M. et al: The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic. In *Scientific Reports*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 16598, p. 1-10. [online]. [2022-01-01]. Available at: <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.pdf?origin=ppub>>.

The factor of time appears to be highly relevant for the global increase of the amount of information and thus needs to be considered. We are facing a rapid, exponential information increase, made possible by accelerated sharing of data. Though the unprecedentedly fast speed of news coverage is beneficial, with the exponential increase in information also comes a risk of information overload in society. This causes information stress and further information overload in the recipients as the cognitive capacity for evaluating and processing information is biologically limited. People cannot possibly conquer the speed and extent of information that flows from both professional and unprofessional media sources. However, it is necessary to manage information at both personal and collective levels. If this does not happen, then the consumption of information accelerates, but without further assessment, without considering the real information value and relevance for given subjects. During the pandemic, this approach may have serious, even fatal consequences.

We can identify an important social phenomenon that constitutes a form of information risk for the recipients of media content. We are speaking about a time-dependent and significant increase in the amount of information with low to no informational value. Globally, the spread of irrelevant information, disinformation, hoaxes, fake news and conspiracies has dramatically risen,²⁴ particularly on social media. Such worthless information has become a major vector of dangerous disinformation,²⁵ its amount and speed talk loud about toxicity.²⁶ Running parallel to the offline pandemic, we witness an infodemic, or disinfectemic.²⁷ At the time of crisis, a disinfectemic weakens correct information,²⁸ inciting confusion and disagreement between people. The outburst of disinformation, fake news and hoaxes leads to increasing social insecurity and endangering the health and lives of people.²⁹

In this context, we can state that it is the technological aspect of our digital society, together with the degree of social insecurity regarding COVID-19, that facilitates a fast spread of this phenomenon. It turns out that the pandemic even aggravates the huge and still growing problem of disinformation that comes with the growth of social media. It basically allows the amplification of the trends associated with the so-called post-truth that were already visible in the pre-pandemic time. In this context, we can speak of the risk of epistemological confusion of the public. This, according to M. Palomo, manifests in the fact that what people consider truthful is chiefly what they want to be truthful, although the criteria for information to be truthful and reliable (for example, comparing the information with high-quality journalism or trusted and peer-

reviewed scientific work) clearly indicate that there is a problem. According to the author, this is exactly what indirectly increases the number of deaths.³⁰

We have already outlined another factor that we see as intervening in media coverage – the noetic (cognitive, or epistemic) factor. As to its effect, we can state that even though from the ethical point of view it is generally possible to distinguish which disinformation is fabricated and shared with and which misinformation is spread without malicious intent,³¹ in the case of COVID-19 both types of problematic information may ultimately be equally lethal to people.³²

So far, we have studied how information is shared in the time and global space of communication practice of media professionals, but also amateurs. Let us, however, concentrate more on professional information dissemination in the context of COVID-19. “*Professional journalism is the key to providing trustful information and fighting myths and rumours. Without it, the false content can grow.*”³³ We can also observe the noetic factor of such information in the perspective of the time factor. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic, with its health and social impact that spreads in time and across space, also its professional media coverage improves with time. We can speak of the evolution or development of professional media reporting with time, but also notice the interaction between noetic and ethical factors. These factors are perhaps the most closely related.

It is clear that for the general public, it is very demanding, both in terms of time and epistemically, to seek, obtain, study and research various information sources that is related to the pandemic (for example, information regarding virology, epidemiology or health protection), and also follow the management of the pandemic and cope with the multitude of public statements and regulations, as well as understand them, merely to be able to adapt to them in everyday life. Media-disseminated journalistic summarisations, comparisons and other messages are (or at least should be) easy to understand for the general public and therefore useful. The noetic factor in professional media reporting is significant in this context and refers to the very noetic (cognitive, epistemic) demand on journalists and their profession. In terms of intervention, it is vitally important that the media coverage is correct, relevant and reliable. Information that the public can rely on, information that is relevant and up-to-date is important for the population of any country in the present situation. After all, as V. MacLeod points out, this information is a matter of life and death.³⁴

Let us notice that media coverage is inevitably bound with knowledge of COVID-19,³⁵ or with views of COVID-19 as a severe health and social problem and/or search of its solution. So, the relevant and possible source of information is found in the relevant personnel. Journalists are epistemically dependent on knowledge, opinions and statements of scientists, doctors and other experts in the field of health care. However, relevant and irreplaceable sources of information are also presented by the government, public bodies, civil servants and politicians. This journalistic practice is grounded, quite specifically and significantly at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, on the premise of expertise of these bodies. For example, scientific reputation in medicine (and other disciplines linked to public health) is not the only relevant factor; other kinds of professional reputation, including the ethical reputation of any of the sources of information, are

24 Remark by authors: The so-called fake news needs to be understood as deliberately untrue, fabricated (dis)information, A. Sámelová points out. See: SÁMELOVÁ, A.: *Moc a pravda v podmienkach Rozhlasu a televízie Slovenska*. Bratislava : Comenius University, 2018, p. 74. See more on the term “fake news”: KAČINOVÁ, V.: *Fenómén „fake news“, hoaxov a konšpiračných teórií v kontexte mediálnej výchovy*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019.

25 MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 34.

26 UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>.

27 Remark by authors: ‘Infodemic’ of disinformation and deliberate lies spreads like a virus on social media. See: MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 9-11; VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J. et al.: Television News as an Information Source and Its Perception in Slovakia. In *Communication Today*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 57; LEVITSKAYA, A., FEDOROV, A.: Analysis of Manipulative Media Texts: World Media Literacy Education Experience. In *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)*, 2020, Vol. 60, No. 3, p. 430. The WHO describes “infodemic” as a “side-illness” that accompanies the COVID-19 pandemic, offering information that is partly precise and partly unprecise, thus making it difficult for people to find trustful sources of information and a reliable knowledge base. Since that new coronavirus has hit almost every country in the world, untruths about it have spread around the world just as quickly. They contribute to spreading infection even further and cause chaos in how society responds to the pandemic. See: UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>. It is obvious that the term “infodemic” was coined to outline the dangers of disinformation and related phenomena at the time of COVID-19, as it could even accelerate the pandemic by influencing and fragmenting the response in society. It is therefore possible to transform it to a new term – “disinfodemic”. See: CINELLI, M. et al.: The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic. In *Scientific Reports*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 16598, p. 1-10. [online]. [2022-01-01]. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.pdf?origin=ppub>.

28 UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>. Remark by authors: Surrounded by a flood of disinformation on profit-driven social media, and facing the still-growing number of robots on Twitter, we are witnessing the ‘fight for the truth’. See: MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 11. It is not a coincidence that some social media, such as YouTube, implement certain restrictions that suppress hoaxes and disinformation relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. See: DAVE, S.: *YouTube to Remove Videos Containing Vaccine Misinformation*. Updated on 29th September 2021. [online]. [2022-01-01]. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/youtube-to-remove-videos-containing-vaccine-misinformation-11632927443>.

29 PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf/>; MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021.

30 PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf/>.

31 MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 34; UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>.

32 See: UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>; PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf/>.

33 UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>.

34 See: MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 9-14; PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf/>.

35 Remark by authors: COVID-19 is a new disease and information about it is only gradually developing. We are still learning, for example, how the coronavirus (SARS-COV-2) behaves, what the exact symptoms are, how to improve diagnostics, if and how a specific treatment may work, what type of vaccine to use or what can be done as prevention. These, and many more, are all medically relevant questions.

valued as well. In general, the higher the reputation of any source of information, the higher the credibility of a journalist. Consequently, the more credible and reliable is the very information offered to the public, which is the key requirement and demand expressed by the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶ However, there are certain noetic risks that endanger reliable media coverage. These risks may bring uncertainty and confusion, but also lead to serious, even fatal consequences.

On the one hand, we see the development of relevant information that is dependent on the natural chronological increase in quality of knowledge in those, who are relevant participants and who not only serve as sources of information for journalists, but also have a great influence on the process of production of media-disseminated information on the COVID-19 pandemic. This natural development seems to present a certain noetic risk for reliable media coverage. Some information is proven over time, but some is questioned, or declared to be false. However, it is necessary to realise that there is still a specific noetic risk for correct and reliable media reporting if competent staff, who should have (and who possess) important knowledge and information that the public cannot have access to and who also carry moral responsibility (for example for its distribution), are, for certain reasons (reasons that are not related to the natural development of information), acting as sources of inaccurate and unreliable information.³⁷

It is also necessary to say that in order to offer truly relevant, correct and reliable information, media professionals – journalists – are expected and required to have a sufficient understanding of special expertise-derived information, competent opinions and declarations relevant to the COVID-19 disease and its management in society. This, however, generally requires a standard epistemic or cognitive preparedness for professional performance, without which reliability of media-provided information is insufficient, regardless of social condition. This constitutes a risk of epistemic or cognitive inadequacy or insufficiency of journalists. It turns out that this may be caused by various conditions, e.g., by the state of cognitive or information overload, work overload, stress or fatigue, as all these conditions have a negative influence on the ability to process knowledge and quickly and accurately verify and evaluate sources of information for media coverage. However, this unfitness may also be caused by (more or less) conscious neglecting of professional epistemic or cognitive training in journalists.

We cannot overlook the intervening time factor in this context. The point is that it takes journalists time to gain the relevant knowledge and understanding that is necessary for creating reliable information and news content.³⁸ Certain latency is needed for journalists to better reflect, analyse and assess the information provided by various kinds of information sources in terms of socially relevant aspects. This time gap is relative and cannot be estimated precisely – it depends on the needs and abilities of a particular subject, or journalist.³⁹ Yet, this time factor influences the very speed of media coverage or its acceleration. We can note here that both the public and media desire a high speed of information spread more than ever, given the social condition influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, only on the condition that this information is correct and reliable. This acceleration of media coverage over time also means acceleration of the processing and construction of information and news, which consequently introduces a risk of epistemic incorrectness and unreliability.

36 Remark by authors: In the context of expertise or scientific reputation, we can mention the standard international scientometric criteria (number of published peer-reviewed articles, chapters and monographs indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, number of citations, a scholar's Hirsch index, international awards and similar) that serve as a norm for evaluation of a scientist. Thus, if a scientist, who is a source of information, achieves the top evaluation, correctness and reliability of provided information are generally assumed. We can note here that the public, also through journalists, usually trusts scientists, their opinions and statements. The journalist, but also the general public, should recognise the expertise of the scientist. See: SOLÍK, M.: *Uznanie ako problém spravodlivosti a jeho mediálna reflexia*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2021, p. 112. However, we should not forget that there is a difference between a journalist as the author of information and a scientist as the author of information. Scientific information does not automatically equal journalistic information. Despite this, from the point of view of the recipients, this information may merge into a media-communicated truth, which may also mean certain risks in terms of reception of media-disseminated information about COVID-19.

37 Remark by authors: We may note here that in this way also the credibility of the journalist – the author of information – rises. The author's criterion of credibility is then ultimately a criterion or indicator of credibility of the medium itself.

38 Remark by authors: When the pandemic began (most probably in November or December 2019, in Wuhan, China) it was unknown precisely how severe the disease was, what kind of virus caused it, how to stop it from spreading or how to treat it. The same also applies to vaccination: the production and testing, monitoring of adverse effects and so on. The temporality of events is therefore, epistemologically speaking, extremely important.

39 Remark by authors: It is quite obvious in the journalistic practice, that someone is 'faster' in acquiring and understanding the necessary information, whilst the other is 'slower' and needs more time to do so.

Here we can generally state that various forms of cognitive or epistemic deficiency in journalists may be the reason why journalists do not publish relevant descriptions and explanations of events, or why they do not provide reliable, relevantly truthful and meaningful up-to-date information. The already mentioned weakening of cognitive abilities (for example, the ability to concentrate) in media professionals as the result of information overload and fatigue, or epistemic failure that relates to the time factor (for instance, under the pressure to inform up-to-date), of failure linked to epistemically problematic information sources from other relevant partners in the chain of media coverage – these are all examples of the already mentioned weakened cognitive ability and epistemic insufficiency in journalists. It is, in this context, important to concentrate also on the relevant ethical factor in media coverage at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, a factor that interacts with the previously mentioned factors, but perhaps most significantly with the epistemic or cognitive factor. A journalistic failure in terms of episteme can be of an ethical nature and *vice versa*. This may particularly be observed in the role of media and journalists in society.

It seems that in terms of information demands of the public, journalists may fail in their standard professional epistemic or cognitive preparation for professional activity (as mentioned earlier). This may come also in the form of conscious neglect. And it is exactly conscious neglect that is understood to be an ethical failure of journalists. In this context, we can speak of a journalistic betrayal in terms of professional and ethical responsibility. However, this failure may even be the result of a possible immanent professional crisis,⁴⁰ but also an ethical crisis that is related to the epistemic crisis. As S. J. A. Ward points out, in journalistic or media practice, journalistic concepts that are linked to ethics, such as "freedom", "service to the public" and "democracy" are sometimes somehow "hollowed out." Journalists often take these terms as simplistic appeals.⁴¹ It is, therefore, possible to sum up that various failures, alienation from ethical and social responsibility in terms of public demand for information, ultimately endanger public health and, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, put our lives at stake.

We need to note that a journalist's responsible approach to informing about the COVID-19 pandemic is conditioned by their free access to the necessary data and information which is held by relevant personnel as (possible) sources of information. As previously mentioned, as far as we speak about the epistemic level of media reporting, journalists fully depend on these sources. Here we should also mention the risk that is involved with obtaining source data and information. It is obvious that obtaining first-hand information is more difficult at the time of a pandemic. It is even possible to identify a particularly noetic and ethically risky trend – the unwillingness to provide information to journalists. Sometimes it is quite problematic to obtain any information from the government. State authorities are often reluctant to provide complete data. So, there is a sort of *de facto* censorship.⁴² This opposes the freedom of information in democratic societies and poses a risk to the right of the public to access information and the right to preserve one's health.⁴³

Last, but not least, we can observe the quality of source information. Generally, media coverage should not contain questionable information. However, we can now, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, state

40 Remark by authors: Lewis pointed out and explained that journalism inclines to underestimate certain aspects of its experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this can be applied to local journalists that are both residents and interested parties in the communities in which they work. See: PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G.: Journalists on COVID-19 Journalism: Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting. In *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2021, Vol. 65, No. 7, p. 978. However, it is important to say that generally, reflection of the experience of professional crisis of journalists is a condition that is necessary for the development of good working conditions for journalists or the existence of journalism that offers a real social value.

41 Remark by authors: WARD, A. J. S.: Journalism Ethics. In WAHL-JORGENSEN, K., HANITZSCH, T. (eds.): *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 303-304. When looking closely at the social reality of the media and journalism, it may be said that at the very least we can often question the implementation of the previously mentioned professional and moral values.

42 Remark by authors: This is the output of research conducted in 2020. The former special rapporteur D. Kaye, informing the UN Human Rights Council, wrote that the pandemic also means a "crisis of freedom of expression (...) facilitated by the information politics that weakened the infrastructure of warning and reporting". See: MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen: International Media Support, 2021, p. 14.

43 Remark by authors: The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic can have a global and long-time influence on access to information and freedom of the press. This could conclude to further restrictions and dangers for journalists and oppression of the right to provide information executed by the press and the right for seeking and receiving accurate information. See: UNESCO: *Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19*. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573>>; PERREAULT, F. M., PERREAULT, P. G., MAARES, P.: Metajournalistic Discourse as a Stabilizer within the Journalistic Field: Journalistic Practice in the COVID-19 Pandemic. In *Journalism Practice*, 2022, Vol. 16, No. 2-3, p. 365-383.

quite frankly that the nature of information sources is often questionable and thus introduces hazards in terms of epistemically reliable and ethical media reporting. It seems that this information may be ideologically manipulated and prone to follow political goals, disseminated over various information elements, primarily by social media and thus to promote a series of ideological views or opinions with an attempt to change views or political and social perspectives of the subject. M. Palomo, following Westerlung, points out that the agents or actors that produce these elements include not only political parties, funds or governments, but also bots, trolls or virtual communities.⁴⁴ However, propaganda and disinformation often dominate in statements made by public authorities, H. Macleod warns,⁴⁵ which means a certain noetic and ethical risk to journalists and relevant media reporting.

However, media reporting can be infiltrated not only by ideology or political interests, but also by risky economic interests that pose a threat to journalism.⁴⁶ Except for political and ideological interests, nothing deforms the noetic accuracy and ethical correctness of media coverage (or its credibility in the eyes of the public) more than ethically unfortunate financial interests of media organisations, institutions, companies or media professionals themselves, the more so if they are journalists. We can state here that these phenomena deepen noetic and ethical risks for the public demand for relevant and reliable information. These risks may ultimately put health and lives at stake in the current pandemic situation in society.⁴⁷

4 Conclusion

The contribution of media reporting and the role of journalism within society lie in their very nature, i.e., in their role in reduction of social insecurity, fear and risk of panic at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This also includes a contribution to the correct and ethical judgement and actions of the public in relation to the pandemic. We can state that journalists are trying to fulfil their professional roles in terms of their responsibility under specific professional conditions and uneasy personal circumstances. These include the global communication ecology related to the COVID-19 pandemic with a direct media cycle, or social media and 'alternative' media practices, but also real-situation problems linked to information sources, job insecurity or underfinanced editorial offices and similar.

It appears that media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is determined by several important factors. We identified the factor of time and space, but also ethical and noetic factors that shape the specific character of interrelating relationships and interactions, while still posing certain risks in the context of promoting correct and ethical actions of the public at the time of the pandemic. It turns out that the time and space factor refer to the technological context of communication ecology concerning the pandemic. On the one hand, this brings the possibility to inform the public and availability of a large amount of relevant information about the pandemic and possible social response, but, on the other hand, also risks in terms of the information objectivity or information demands of the public. These include information explosion and information overload in society (including "(dis)infodemic") which have an impact on journalism and its real influence on the public. While it is true that journalists share important information with the public on social media and via other communication platforms, it is also true that they have little power over it, as the sources of information that are available and published here cannot be fully controlled.

44 PALOMO, M.: How Disinformation Kills: Philosophical Challenges in the Post-Covid Society. In *History and Philosophy of the Life Science*, 2021, Vol. 43, No. 51, p. 1-5. [online]. [2022-01-20]. Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40656-021-00408-4.pdf>>.

45 MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 15.

46 Remark by authors: It is extremely difficult for the media to maintain objectivity and impartiality if they are sponsored by national governments or pharmaceutical companies. If the government provides mainstream media funding for advertising campaigns (testing, vaccination, etc.) then it is not surprising that these media will not speak out against vaccination or about its possible negative side effects. If large organisations, such as WHO and EMA are sponsored by large pharmaceutical foundations (e.g., the Gates Foundation), then we can expect that their decisions will be favourable for these companies and foundations.

47 Remark by authors: As pointed by D. Kaye, individuals and communities cannot protect themselves against diseases when they are denied access to information, when their trust in sources of information is reduced and when statements of public authorities are full of propaganda and disinformation. See: MACLEOD, H.: *COVID-19 and the Media: A Pandemic of Paradoxes*. Copenhagen : International Media Support, 2021, p. 14-15.

Risks can also be seen within the identified selected factors of ethics and noetics in journalists. Several of them are related to the well-known and former problems, such as the problem with the quality of journalistic information, professional ethical crisis in the context of ethically non-standard interests and media relations (ideological, political or economic), but also personal moral failures in journalists and negligence in terms of epistemic or cognitive preparation and similar. Another, more recent problem seems to relate to the noetic professional crisis in connection with crises of relevant terms in journalism, which may turn into ethical crises. We can note here, in this context, that the values of the epistemic and ethical dimension of providing information about the state of the COVID-19 pandemic are not isolated from the whole system of further values, at both the individual and social level. They meet, interact and compete with each other (for example, with commercial, political or ideological values).

Let us finally note that in the post-covid society it will probably be necessary to respond to the needs for revision in terms of risks in media reporting and journalistic practice. These risks also suggest the need to strengthen the autonomy of media professionals as well as to strengthen their moral integrity and promote the necessary development of their ethical, cognitive and epistemic competencies, with regard to their collaboration within society and deliberative processes. We can see a challenge in this context – the need for strengthening the ethical and social responsibility of all the parties participating in media communication, and in this perspective also the importance and necessity of media education.

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