



UNMASKING OF MEDIA RELEASES IN MONTENEGRO AND THE REGION

Infection with manipulation

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INTRODUCTION •

Since technological progress has changed the way citizens are being informed, the media have found themselves facing a serious challenge – how to remain consistent with professional standards and not turn into a propaganda pamphlet factory masked in journalistic reports while providing financial sustainability. Inability of the media to find an adequate response to these challenges has led the societies around the world to have their citizens consume media manipulation through media content as well. Even states that often deny the existence of this phenomenon and find no adequate response to it, contribute to the spread of infection with manipulation.

This is the current situation in Montenegro as well, and through a six-month analysis of media releases, we have found that manipulations in media reporting on international politics are present mostly in online media.

At the end of 2018, we launched the platform called Raskrinkavanje.me, in cooperation with partners from Sarajevo Citizens' Association "Why not", with the financial support of the National Endowment for Democracy, with the aim to show citizens through specific examples that they must carefully consume media content and make the difference between professional and tabloid reporting.

During the six-month period, our team has analyzed at least 500 articles from around 200 local and regional media outlets. In this initial phase, until we further build capacities, we are monitoring media releases on international policy, defense and security since these are the topics that are the focus of CDT's work through the Info Center on Euro-Atlantic Integration. In several cases, we have also been monitoring releases of regional media outlets that are very well read in Montenegro.

By using our methodology, we have recognized a whole range of media manipulations ranging from "clickbaits" (the title promises content that is not in the article) as

“the least serious violation”, through disinformation, manipulation of facts, biased reporting, unverified media releases, conspiracy theories to “false news” as “the most serious violation” (media produce completely false information on their own and present it as a fact)

Reasons for publishing these manipulations in Montenegrin and regional media outlets are numerous, but the general impression is that one group of media outlets manipulates because their purpose is to spread anti-democratic values, while for the other group profit is the basic motivation. Regardless of the motives of media outlets to publish such unprofessional content, we need to be aware that such reporting leads to increased tensions and intolerance between different ethnic groups, it undermines the civic values and the concept of society that is based on informed citizens who can think and decide independently.

The institutions’ response to these dangerous tendencies that are visible in the Montenegrin society is missing. This is confirmed not only by the absence of an initiative to create policies to counter media manipulation, but also by often ignoring our inquiries for information that would help us evaluate articles of suspicious content.

Therefore, based on the analysis we have carried out, we made recommendations to institutions, media community and civil society for changing the current situation.

We remain open to all well-meaning criticisms, suggestions and possible clarifications of our findings.

CDT team



Manipulative releases on foreign policy do exist in Montenegro •



The semi-annual work carried out by the team of Raskrinkavanje.me platform has shown that the media in Montenegro are publishing media manipulations for various reasons.

The first group of media outlets consciously publishes media manipulations for ideological reasons and from the need to represent a certain system of values. In these media outlets, there is an obvious wish of journalists to encourage nationalism and conflict and spread hatred between different ethnic groups. There is an impression that this is the purpose of their existence. Moreover, an important reason for publishing sensationalist and inaccurate information may be to turn the attention to another event in the media space. In addition to this, by constantly placing manipulation on a certain topic over a longer period of time, these media outlets are trying to create “narratives” that correspond to their ideological orientation or commissioner.

The other group are the better, more professional media outlets that, like most media outlets in the world, are in the process of adapting to a new

environment and mode of functioning. Lack of resources, the need for a large amount of information released in a short time span and a small capacity of editorial staff, often prevents them from checking the information well, so it is happening also that these media outlets are releasing manipulative content. There were also cases when both these groups of reasons were involved, so unprofessional content was published for ideological reasons along with the desire to increase readership of the media.

Our observations on the existence of these manipulations also coincide with the results of public opinion polls, according to which most citizens, but also journalists, believe that false news exists and that it poses a problem for Montenegrin society.

Media manipulations mostly in online media •



Online media are forced to publish a large number of articles in a short period of time, because the entire atmosphere in which they work, as well as tough competition and a fight for readers and advertisers compels them to do that. This behavior largely results in a shorter timeframe for working on articles to be published, and it opens up more room for media manipulation.

The analysis of the team of Raskrinkavanje.me platform shows that half of the media outlets that publish media manipulation have no impressum, meaning that it is not known who their owners and editors are. Articles on these portals are often not signed by the author's name, so no liability can be established for the published content.

There is a noticeable expansion of anonymous portals where it is obvious that they intend to create media manipulations.

These portals serve as a base or place on which the manipulative news will be published first, and then other, better known and more read portals will share it. It is not a rare case that these portals remove the controversial news after its release in other media outlets.

In traditional media - on television or in press we have noticed less media manipulation in the field of foreign policy and security. In these media outlets, there is much less room for publishing information in the field of foreign policy, and there is much more time to check the information before the major information show starts or until the edition is finished. Additionally, these media outlets still have procedures for editing and taking responsibility for published information.


Not every manipulation is “false news” •



The Montenegrin public often misuses the word “false news” or “spin” as a synonym for media manipulation. However, there are at least ten forms of media manipulations which differ in the manner of placement and effects. If we take into account that there are different forms of media manipulations, we can conclude that there is **almost no online media outlet in Montenegro that has not published at least one media manipulation in the field of foreign policy during the last six months.**

Since the beginning of analyzing media content, **the most common and everyday form of manipulation we have noted is a “clickbait”**, meaning that the title promises content that is not in the article. These are sensationalist headlines such as “you won't believe / you must see this / how shocking”, whose purpose is to attract the attention of readers and which are mostly created for increasing readership or financial interest.

Every fourth media manipulation is disinformation - which means that the media outlets often publish articles and headlines that are a mix of fact and false or partially true content. Disinformation is mostly pub-



lished by regional media outlets, and then the Montenegrin media spread it further, without any verification of accuracy. We also noted several cases when disinformation was produced by Montenegrin media outlets.

This form of manipulation is present in reporting on unresolved regional issues such as relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which is followed by the constant spread of fear from formation of the so-called Greater Albania and hatred towards Albanian people which is created by right-wing oriented media outlets.

Facts are often manipulated when reporting on these topics. **We have noticed that every fifth media manipulation is manipulation of facts**, meaning that the media outlets use accurate information, but they interpret them in a misleading manner and lead readers to a wrong conclusion.

During these six months of analysis, **we have also found releases that we rated as “conspiracy theory”** - these are false descriptions of some events that are presented as part of or the result of a hidden plan. There are numerous articles that offend common sense - for example, about the movement of people claiming that Earth is a flat panel, that the CIA wants to take away Ostrog Monastery from the Serbs, that vaccines kill, and the like.

False news, as information that some media outlets have produced completely on their own and which contains factually incorrect claims, **is not a mass phenomenon in Montenegro** when it comes to reporting on international relations. We have noted the individual cases created by the local media outlets, but false news is more often created by media outlets from the region, and then the Montenegrin media outlets spread it further without verifying its accuracy.

Through the examples such as reporting on an attack of the Serbian citizen Sara Vidak on a judge in Kotor, then the arrival of the Serbian Patriarch Irinej Gavrilović in Montenegro or the recent events related to the ABA League game between Budućnost – Crvena Zvezda, we saw the greatest amount of media manipulation. These were examples of how unprofessional media, often with the help of politicians or other important social actors, turn seemingly harmless cases into incidents, raise tensions, create inter-state polemics, and ignore the need for objective reporting in the service of public interest.

How to counteract media manipulation more efficiently •



States, institutions and organizations are trying to find a way to prevent media manipulations and devise an adequate response to their organized expansion. This is a rather sensitive issue, and its resolution must be approached with special attention, as this is a question of freedom of speech as well.

Taking into account the democratic achievements and at the same time wanting to contribute to the beginning of solving these problems, we propose to the Government, the media and the citizens the following:

The Government must urgently start to create a policy (strategies, action plans ...) for preventing media manipulation and limiting its influence

The Government of Montenegro officially denies the existence of disinformation since, so far, it did not have any public action on this issue. The resolution passed by the European Parliament at the beginning of the year, which concerns hostile propaganda and response to it, has also been ignored.


The Resolution recommends all EU countries that continue to deny the existence of disinformation and hostile propaganda, as well as their influence on public opinion, to acknowledge their existence, analyze the situation in their territory and to take proactive measures to expose them and to oppose them. It also recommends that EU accession countries and EU neighborhood partners should be helped with countering hostile propaganda and the spread of disinformation.

This Resolution may serve as a foundation for drafting the Strategy for the Fight against the Spread of Media Manipulations in Montenegro.

Launching regional or intergovernmental initiatives to counter media manipulation

Part of the region that speaks the same language is actually a unique Internet market. Everything that is published in the region is easily accessible to citizens living in the territory of Montenegro, so the solution to the problem is not only in actions within the state. An answer to the phenomenon of spreading disinformation cannot be pursued only from a national level because the information on the territory of the former Yugoslavia is not regulated by borders but by the same language, which is why any disinformation that is published in the





region reaches Montenegrin media for a very short time, and vice versa. That is why Montenegrin institutions have to deal with this issue through regional initiatives.

More active involvement of the media community in solving this problem •



In fighting this phenomenon, the media community has a key role to play. The media must work to increase professional standards in their media outlets and educate journalists to respect professional standards when publishing information. Additionally, self-regulation is needed at the level of the media community, which would give the response and recommendations for addressing the issue of media manipulation.

Creating a critical attitude of citizens towards media content •



The institutions, media community and civil society should launch a citizen education campaign in order to teach them to carefully read media content and to make the difference between professional and tabloid or “copy / paste” journalism. This broad social action would raise awareness among citizens as media content consumers and help them choose professional and proven sources of information and actively participate in sharing media content on social networks.





CDT Research Center

The CDT Research Center (RC) was established in 2011 with the support of the Think Tank Fund. Aim of the RC is improvement of public policies, adoption of more quality decisions by state bodies, enhancing public dialogue and strengthening of institutions.

In its work, the **RC** uses contemporary research methods and is guided by standards of transparency, objectivity and accuracy. Relying on comparative examples of good practice and concrete results, it defines measures and recommendations for improvement, which are delivered to decision makers and the general public.

RC is dedicated to continuous building of its own capacities seeing it as a quality control mechanism for its research products, and, in addition to the CDT team, a number of domestic and international experts are involved in its work as external associates.

We recommend the following policy papers to your attention:

Please read the following documents on the need for making changes to election legislation and reaching democratic standards of fair elections:

Assessment of progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU, Part I: Legitimacy and integrity of elections - a necessary step towards European values

<https://www.cdtmn.org/2018/11/02/vrijeme-je-da-zatvorimo-poglavlje-fer-izbora/>

After three major election cycles: How to achieve electoral integrity

<https://www.cdtmn.org/izbori/izbori-analize/kako-do-izbornog-integriteta-2018-predlog-prakticne-politike/>

State Election Commission in Montenegro - a failed experiment. Necessary steps to create a credible institution <https://www.cdtmn.org/2018/06/21/drzavna-izborna-komisija-neuspjeli-eksperiment/>

Depoliticized and efficient election administration - a prerequisite of having trust in elections <https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/DIK-Policy-01022017.pdf>

Recommendations for improving the work of the Agency for Prevention of Corruption - Review of the conclusions published in the report on the control of parliamentary elections

<https://www.cdtmn.org/izbori/izbori-analize/preporuke-za-unapredenje-rada-agencije/>

Please read the following documents on how civil society experts see progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU:

Assessment of progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU, Part V: Public administration: a citizen service or a toy in the hands of politics? <https://www.cdtmn.org/dobroupravljanje/du-analize/javna-uprava-ne-ra-di-u-interesu-gradana/>

Assessment of progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU, Part IV: Dreary events and other media stories <https://www.cdtmn.org/2019/02/21/nezavisnost-i-sloboda-medija-samo-na-papiru/>

Assessment of progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU, Part III: Independent institutions as prerequisites for combating corruption and crime
<https://www.cdtmn.org/2019/02/11/nezavisne-institucije-preduslov-za-borbu-protiv-korupcije-i-kriminala-2018/>

Assessment of progress of Montenegro in meeting political criteria in negotiations with the EU, Part II: Judiciary
<https://www.cdtmn.org/2018/12/15/nakon-18-godina-reforme-pravosuda-devaluacija-postignuca/>

Please read the following documents on how the state and local governments plan development, measure the success of their work, and what should they do to improve the practices in this area:

Planning, measuring, and reporting leveraging success of government policies
<https://www.cdtmn.org/dobroupravljanje/du-analize/predlog-practicne-politike/>

Planning, measuring, and reporting leveraging success of government policies - On the example of the municipalities of Nikšić and Kotor
<https://www.cdtmn.org/dobroupravljanje/du-analize/upravljanje-za-rezultate-na-lokalnom-nivou-2017-predlog-practicne-politike/>

Please read the following document on how the state recognizes violent extremism and how it counters it:

How to improve implementation of the Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism?
<https://www.cdtmn.org/eu/eu-analize/kako-poboljsati-sprovođenje-strategije-suzbijanja-nasilnog-ekstremizma-2017-predlog-practicne-politike/>





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