



**READY-MADE NEWS,
A REAL THREAT
TO MEDIA FREEDOM**

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Norwegian Embassy



Summary

At the height of the second wave of the pandemic created by coronavirus in 2020, reporters reporting from Covid 19 hospitals were no closer than allowed by a police tape marking the security perimeter. But, one day, Prime Minister Rama announced on his page on social networks: “Tomorrow you will follow exclusive images from the first line of fire”. The next day, on a Facebook channel called ERTV, a TV report was shown from Covid-1 hospital in Tirana. Patients interviewed by ERTV reporters indicated that they were satisfied with the services in the hospital and thanked the doctors.

Almost all News Televisions linked their broadcasts to ERTV, while others referred to ERTV reporting in news editions.

ERTV is a very popular “Tv Channel” in Albania. It has the exclusivity of all government meetings, visits and conferences attended by the prime minister. It is a “television channel” of the prime minister’s office, which produces exclusive materials for the activity and promotion of the government, which are then published by other media. A TV news item, produced by ERTV and then broadcast by other media, showed a man in Lac sleeping in a tent with his family after his house had been completely destroyed

by the earthquake of November 26th 2019. When the prime minister visited his tent, he was so happy that he said: “Even if you do not build my house, it is fine for me, you came to visit us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ta8vUCpAPg>

The situation can be considered surreal.

Government institutions, from the prime minister himself, the ministries, the municipalities, their subordinate institutions, and of course the political parties, produce the films themselves, the interviews and the text of the information and send it to the media. Now, public relations offices can be considered as genuine newsrooms.

This practice started as a “success story of cooperation”, about 15 years ago, during election campaigns, when the media accepted ready-made materials of political parties, as it could not cover all the meetings of the candidates. It was cemented year after year, as a way of completely controlling the information coming from parties and senior governing institutions.

The practice of ready-made media materials, mainly on television, has greatly narrowed the space of media freedom, as well as severely compromised the professional-



ism of journalists. It violates the principles of impartiality, verification and accuracy of news, which are universal and fundamental principles for journalists.

The national media produce news with a single source, without even going to the field, without verifying the statements and without investigating them, through questions that can be asked to officials. This is because journalists are not informed about the place and time of the activity and do not follow it.

Televisions broadcast almost the same news from the activities of the government and its subordinate institutions, as well as the activities of political parties, providing the same information, the same text and the same statements of officials.

The practice of “ready-made tapes” has been constantly criticized by the community of journalists and international institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Tirana. But despite this, it came to be expanded.

II - Conclusions

From the interviews and opinions, we received from editors and journalists, central and local, it results that:

Journalists/reporters, in 40% of cases, are not informed about the time and place of an activity of the prime minister, ministers, or other senior state and party officials.

Journalists/reporters, in 60% of cases, are not free to participate in these activities, even when they are informed about their occurrence.

Journalists/reporters, in over 90% of cases say that they are not allowed to participate in these activities even when they manage to be informed about their development.

Journalists/reporters, almost 100% of cases, think that for a government activity, the news would be significantly different, if they would follow the activity themselves, and would not refer to the material that comes ready from the press offices.

Journalists/reporters, in 100% of cases, think that the news come ready from the press offices, more than news, are promotional materials for officials or institutions.

Journalists/reporters, in 100% of cases, think that this practice has damaged the professionalism of journalists and has damaged the credibility of citizens in the media.

III - Methodology

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The project monitored, during a period of 2 months, March - April 2020, three national televisions; TVSH, Klan and Top Channel, to verify the intensity of the ready-made news included in the news editions. In frame of the project activities, there have been interviewed 18 journalists, in order to verify the level of ready-made news which are broadcasted during the news editions.

Klan TV broadcasted 612 news produced with ready-made materials coming from the press office of the government, ministries, the Municipality of Tirana, the opposition and other institutions.

Top Channel broadcasted 158 news items produced with ready-made materials coming from the press office of the government, ministries, the Municipality of Tirana, the opposition and other institutions.

TVSH broadcasted 73 news produced with ready-made

materials coming from the press office of the government, ministries, the Municipality of Tirana, the opposition and other institutions.

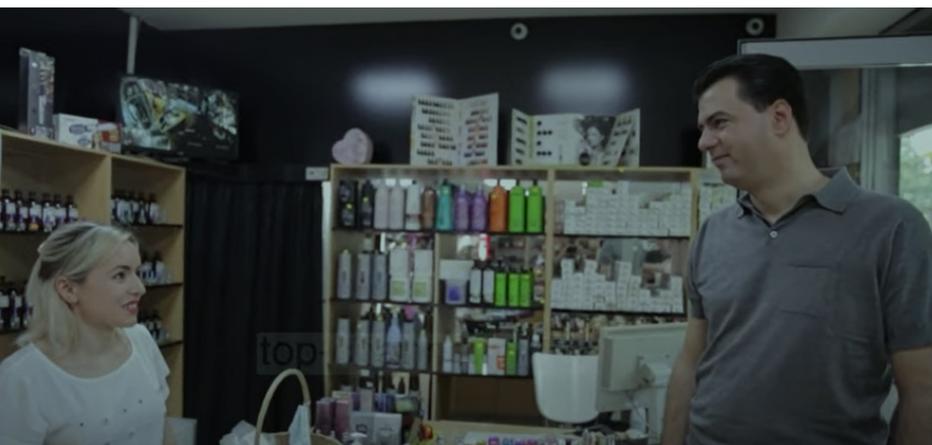
There were interviewed 18 news editors and journalists were interviewed to testify to the media's relationship with the institutions.

In addition, the project staff has organized 5 focus groups, where participate about 60 local journalists in 6 regions of the country, such as Kukës, Shkodër, Elbasan, Vlorë, Korçë and Gjirokastër, to learn media reports with local government and news reporting related to activities attended by central officials.

Editors and journalists were asked if they were informed in advance about the activities organized or attended by the Prime Minister.

There were asked to them if they are allowed to participate in these activities, even when they manage to have information on the organization of these activities?

It was asked to know how professional they think the news is produced from the ready-made materials sent to them by the press offices of the institutions.



The organization reserved the publication of the full names of journalists, because some of them thought that a claim of their opinion on this issue can cause problems with media executives where they work

IV- Project findings

Television monitoring

From the monitoring process, 843 news items that turned out to be built on information sources and footage produced by the press offices of public institutions and political parties were analyzed by media experts on their content and professional standards.

From the analysis we made of this news, it results that they contain only positive information, with a promotional character for the institution and their head. About 60% of these news show inspections of public works by the prime minister, ministers or the mayor of Tirana. As the monitoring was carried out during the pandemic, some of these news items are reactions or statements of health officials, as well as statements or attitudes of a political nature, both from the majority and the opposition.

They do not meet the professional criteria to be broadcasted.

They are news with only one source.

They are not balanced news.

Not all parties referred in the news are mentioned, in cases when accusations against another party have been addressed.

In most cases, the footage is staged in the field.

Interviewing and focus groups with journalists

Are the Journalists informed about the occurrence of an activity?

18 news editors and journalists, as well as about 60 local journalists and correspondents, gave their opinions through interviews and focus group discussions on relations with the press offices of central and local institutions.



A.M: We are informed about an activity of the Prime Minister, only 15-10 minutes before the start of the activity. The announcement comes via a message on WhatsApp. As the Prime Minister's activities are broadcast via ERTV, in most cases, they have been recorded earlier, which makes it impossible to follow them. We as journalists do not have the agenda of the prime minister at least two days before. If before a journalist used his resources to reveal a news, a government initiative, today we journalists use the resources to learn about the activities of the prime minister

and his agenda. In recent years, the opposition leader is acting in the same line.

E.Z: We are not informed in advance, but only a few minutes in advance. This also happens when there are high-level official visits. You need to consume a minimum of 5 phone calls in the morning to manage to learn the daily agenda of the prime minister.

E.K: We are not informed about the activities of the prime minister and the ministers, except in rare cases when we are invited to press conferences. The announcements we receive are almost always of the character “after a while, or at X o’clock, to follow this event on Facebook”.

E.GJ: A large part of the activities are directed and the TVs receive the signal through the frequencies of ERTV, the prime minister’s television channel on FB. For the party meetings of prime minister Rama with the status of SP leader, in the vast majority of cases there are no announcements.

I.M: There are many cases when we are not informed in advance and the announcement comes only after the activity is completed, prepared by the press offices and is ready to be published in the online media, or sent to the newsrooms by email.

R.Z: Generally, we are not informed but even when we are, it is about activities that are broadcast on fb where in 90 percent of cases journalists are not broadcast-ed. In addition, journalists do not have the opportunity to follow as they become aware of the moment the activity takes place.

So there is no time. In these conditions the finished material is expected.

K.C: The activities of the prime minister are rarely reported. Mostly just a few minutes before they show up on ERTV. The head of the Democratic Party always announced the tours in the districts. Now even this party no longer announces its activities in advance.

V.L: No, we are not notified. Live generally appear suddenly on Facebook, even from activities that have been previously recorded and appear as if they were live.

E.K: We need to be informed in advance and allow to follow up the activities carried out by the officials. We need to use our own cameras, film the activities and later produce our own material/news. We need to take care ourselves for all the preparation of the news and later to choose what material we will receive for transmission.

M.M: Almost never, we as local journalists of the central media have been notified of the arrival of senior officials, starting with the prime minister. They come and carry out activities, prepare the materials themselves and send them



to the newsrooms and we later learn that in our city there was a minister or prime minister, only after watching the news on TV.

E.R: The model produced by the central government has been extended to the local level, where the municipality also produces and distributes its materials. The minister of agriculture was coming to Vlora and we were not informed by anyone, only when we saw the news in the evening and saw Mr. Çuçi at the fish baths. None of our colleagues had information about this visit.

B.B: Any kind of communication has passed on social networks. In case when we request any official information or feedback and the answer is: It will be posted on facebook. Local media neither announce nor bring ready-made materials. City officials have a very cold relationship with the media.

M.D: Kukes has no water and no media talks about it. But it seems the threat has gone far beyond that. Although in these conditions, we can not even find citizens to complain, as everyone fears that the government will take revenge.

B.Xh: I think we should be informed and allowed to participate in activities. It's the A of journalism, to be in the field to later produce the news. We must be active, ask questions of officials. For this reason, we have constantly insisted to get more information than officials choose to share.

B.M: We often hear that there are no more journalists today. No, there are journalists, but all channels of media

communication with the public have been distorted. The majority of political leaders make their statements, post them on social media and this is considered a news for the media. A statement to the media, but without journalists.

B.SH: No institution provides information. No spokesperson gives you an answer, even for basic official information. The situation is alarming, censorship and self-censorship is today the horror of media freedom.

Xh.Sh: We must also look at ourselves, as the level of professionalism of journalists has decreased. This has made the attempt to introduce ready-made materials more easily accepted.

L.Xh: The ready-made materials have made the press offices replace the journalists and consequently in the cases when we ask to receive information from the institutions, it seems that we are creating inconvenience to the state offices. We cannot verify the news we broadcast, as cooperation with the institutions is almost zero.

But how much does this procedure affect the quality of journalists' reporting? How much has it damaged the quality of the media and the professionalism of journalists? So how different is the ready-made news from the news that the journalist prepare themselves?

K.C: There is a difference. There is critical reporting, there are pros and cons in the chronicles prepared by the journalists themselves. While the chronicles distributed by the press offices of the institutions have only positive information, which serves more PR of the head than public information.

E.Z: Of course the change is radical, especially for televisions. Although you may have been informed by sources of many details, which are not included in the information provided by the press office, you find it impossible to deal with it as long as there are no images to prove how was the real nature of the activity because the journalists did not had the opportunity to be present at the place where the activity / visit took place.

M.H: Journalists have the willing and insist to participate in order to address more specific questions and in this way to go deeper the issue. The government and ministries have channelled the publication of their online activities and the opportunity for journalists to ask comes only when the prime minister or ministers announce a press conference. The Municipality of Tirana does not remember if there was ever a press conference by Mayor Veliaj. While from the Presidency and political parties, journalists are informed in the majority of cases and they participate these activities.



E.K: In the cases when you work with served materials, you are limited. You see what they have brought you. You do not see a complete picture, details that can make a difference. You are not able to have a full picture of participants, their body language, full speech. So, the possibility is clearly limited when working on the materials brought by the press office. These offices offer marketing, the news of one journalist may be completely different from another, and may not be in any of the sentences conveyed by the press office.

E.Gj: Obviously when you prepare the news yourself, it comes different. Whereas when it comes from the press office, all the media broadcast the same news, constructed in the same way. The only difference remains the duration of the chronicle. The essence is the same, as the characters and the text have been prepared by the respective press office. The views and synchronous are the same.

J.D: Of course, there is a lot of difference. The information provided by the press office is intended to channel the purpose of doing the PR of the institution and not to inform the public independently and professionally.

A.M: The situation today is more critical. Because the material that is served to us from the FBs of officials, or sent with links, are not raw materials. They are selected news, staged, edited by the press office, which has taken on the role of an editorial office, with an editor-in-chief and journalists. In this sense, the only thing left for us to do as journalists is a fact-check between the statements, the initiatives that the government takes and those that it manages to realize or not.

R.S: Yes, there is a lot of difference. Because when the footage or information comes from the press office, the journalist is obliged to transmit that information or images that come to him. In case when the journalist attends the activity himself, and has his own camera, the journalist chooses which images he will use, or what information he needs in order to prepare the chronicle.

L.P: I believe we are at a time when it is politics that monitors the media, and not the media politics, as it should be in reality. Local journalists are under pressure. There have been cases when a news item produced by a local journalist conflicts the interests of the government, which has relations with the media, then journalists are threatened with dismissal.

A.Q: This practice has also killed the trust of citizens in the media. Considering that all served news have a positive nature and are in the same line with the publications of the municipality, citizens no longer refer to the media as an independent institution.

Gj.Gj: The materials produced and distributed by the institutions are not professional. The same materials are published in all media.

O.C: All media broadcast the same news. The same text, the same picture, the same interviews, or declarations. I would say that in these conditions, we are not called journalists, but video broadcasters.

V - Recommendations

The media are in a situation where they are not informed about government, central and local activities. To produce news on these activities, they use:

1. Materials that have previously passed to the editing studio in the press offices, where the images have been selected, the statements (synchronous) of the headline have been cut, and sent to the media simply to give the final “hand” to the news.
2. Images that go through LIVE in social media

Some media have chosen to reject the first option, preferring, at least, the second option, where they have more opportunities to produce more professional news.

All media have the opportunity to reject both versions. But they do not. Because a “peaceful” coexistence has already been established between the media and the government, as senior officials feel comfortable with their monologues, which they call press releases.

The correspondent for Shkodra, of a central media outlet, received pressure from his leaders after asking a question to the Minister of Economy, during a visit he had in Shkoder and he did not like the addressed question. The news did not include the material he had prepared, but the material sent by the ministry’s press office.



While the prime minister of the country, interrupted the press conference because a journalist insisted on getting an answer to her question.

Journalists feel revolted by this situation.

They ask:

1. To put an end to this practice, by asking from the media where they work, the rejection of ready-made media materials.
2. To have the opportunity to attend the activities of parties and senior officials of the central and local government.
3. Media to be informed in advance about the agenda of any activity organized by government institu-

tions, central and local and political parties. It is up to them to follow you or not.

In conclusion, we chose the call of an experienced journalist in Kukës, Sulejman Dida:

“We must react in block to the arrogance of the government and officials, who now see us as their employees, who must be served with messages and promotional news. We have betrayed the community, becoming tools of power, and this is the greatest loss we have suffered.”

