

Lack of transparency stimulated the spread of infodemia

Transparency of public institutions marked a sharp decline during 2020, facilitating the spread of a wave of false news, which increased the gap of mistrust between citizens and the media.

By Klodiana Lala and Merxhan Daci

When last March in Albania marked the first case of infection of a citizen with COVID-19, institutions quickly rushed to close the doors, restrict the circulation of vehicles and impose measures of social distancing, in an effort to prevent the spread of speed of the new coronavirus.

A2CNN TV journalist Armand Bajrami found himself away from the courtroom, where for 13 years he had followed various judicial processes and forwarded them to the public.

"The pandemic and the restrictions imposed because of it, made the work of journalists reporting on court cases extremely difficult," Bajrami recalls.

"Not allowing journalists in courtrooms deprived the public of quality and complete reporting of events," he said.

Bajrami does not blame the pandemic, but talks about the pronounced lack of culture of transparency by justice institutions, adding that this is due to the dysfunction of press offices, but also the non-consolidation of judges or media prosecutors, which has creates a vacuum in communicating to the public the results of the activity of the judiciary in the country.

The pandemic that gripped the world over the past year completely changed human behavior and also affected the journalistic profession. Unable to work from home, field journalists faced multiple challenges.

On the one hand, they had to protect their health and that of their families, amid waves of pandemic spread, and on the other hand, they had to report and confirm the information disseminated by government institutions, which in a time of extreme health crisis, were more vital than ever.

Institutions were not always open in their work, and according to journalists, they often violated legal deadlines to respond to requests for the right to information, using the pandemic as a pretext to justify a lack of transparency.

BesarLikmeta, editor of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, points out that Albania has good laws regarding the right to information, but bad practice, which he says, restricts the public's right to be heard. He emphasizes that during the pandemic the institutions found a "justification" in the pandemic itself for not being transparent.

"Since it was an extraordinary time, the institutions should perform even better, but this did not happen," said Likmeta.

BesnikDervishi, Commissioner for the Right to Information and Personal Data Protection, justifies the delays in providing information with the difficulty of the public administration to adapt to the new conditions created by the pandemic.

"The public administration has been unprepared for work from home (online) during the pandemic, which has led to delays in providing information, but this for objective reasons," said the Commissioner, although he admits that there have been cases of negligence by public authority.

Behind closed doors

Journalists who have not been able to obtain information from institutions on various issues have lodged complaints with the Office of the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Personal Data Protection.

During 2020, 750 complaints were filed with the Commissioner, of which 265 were submitted by investigative journalists. The commissioner has made a decision in only 15 cases.

Most of the journalists' complaints to the Commissioner are related to violations of deadlines by the institutions to respond to requests for the right to information, while in other cases, because they were given incomplete answers.

"The Ministry of Health has been one of the least transparent institutions during this period," said InvaHasanaliaj, a journalist with the fact-finding organization Faktoje.al.

"From this institution I have no answer for at least 11 requests that have been sent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic," added Hasanaliaj, who emphasizes that delays in providing information damaged not only her work and that of colleagues, but also the right of the public to be informed.

Dorian Matlija, lawyer of the Center 'Res Publica' is of the opinion that Albanian institutions are closing their doors to the media more and more every day, especially when the issues on which journalists seek information are sensitive.

"The most sensitive information for the public is not accessed at all, or accessed too late, to the point that it loses value," he explained, adding that Council of Europe standards for crisis information were not respected by the government during the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

BIRN editor BesarLikmeta also points out that during the pandemic, institutions became even more closed than before.

"We have lacked transparency from health institutions for information related to the health of people threatened by the pandemic, information on affected patients, or people who have died," said Likmeta, adding that the lack of transparency spread like a virus also in other institutions.

Dorian Matlija goes even further. He says that during the pandemic, information became a monopoly of the government, which tried to marginalize journalists.

"The pandemic situation was used for propaganda by Prime Minister Edi Rama, who took over the direction of public communication, monopolizing the content and wording and the way the media received information," he said.

The same opinion is shared by Flutura Kusari, Legal Adviser at the European Center for Freedom of the Press and Media in Leipzig, who says that Albania has had a negative performance in terms of transparency compared to countries in the region.

"When I compare Kosovo and Albania, I see an extremely big difference, while on one side we have the Prime Minister Edi Rama, who has full machinery behind him in order to control the information, in order to hinder the journalists, in order to make sure that the public listens, what he has to say, not the truth," said Kusari, who stressed that in Kosovo there is still freedom of expression, freedom of thought and journalists work in a relatively safe environment.

According to Kusari, in Kosovo, unlike Albania, institutions were more open and transparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"In principle, the institutions have been extremely open," she said. "All information related to the pandemic, except the contract for the purchase of vaccines have been open, unlike Albania where there was a closure of information," added Kusari.

For the lawyer Dorian Matlija, this is also due to the fact that the Commissioner for the Right to Information has not made serious efforts to promote the transparency of public institutions.

"The commissioner does not take decisions on the vast majority of complaints," said Matlija, while emphasizing that only 5% of cases are handled by a decision of the commissioner. "Many cases of mediation were not in fact 'solutions', as the name suggests," he added.

Besar Likmeta is also critical of the work of the Commissioner for the Right to Information, as long as he says that even the institution that has the duty to make transparency in some cases has violated the deadlines for making administrative decisions.

"There have been cases where we have been forced to make a request for information to the Commissioner for the Right to Information himself to give us an answer on what he was doing with our complaints," he said.

"Most complaints are closed without a clear decision from the Commissioner, even though the information was not obtained from the journalist and when this happens to the investigative journalist, imagine the approach that the general public can have," he added.

Despite the small number of decisions or administrative measures taken by the Commissioner for the Right to Information, journalist Hasanaliaj says that his role has been supportive in her work.

"The commissioner has had a supporting role during this period, as he was the only institution which" forced "the Ministry of Health to respond to requests for information," she said.

"I personally received a response after every complaint I made and the procedure was followed until the end," Hasanaliaj added.

On the other hand, Armand Bajrami says that he rarely knocks on the doors of this institution and this, according to him, is related to the pressure of time imposed by the news cycle on information television.

"Despite the silence received during the pandemic by the institutions of the justice system, I did not address the Commissioner," said Bajrami.

"This is because the specifics of reporting current events require real-time information, which does not match the deadlines required to receive an official response to requests for information or to complain to the Commissioner," he explained.

Under the fever of infodemia

IldaLondo from the Albanian Media Institute praises the efforts of journalists to convey accurate and fact-based information during the pandemic, but nevertheless raises the concern that the media also gave space to individuals who spread conspiracy theories.

"During the pandemic, the protagonists and the people who promote them were given a protagonist role, something that serves neither journalism nor the public interest," Londo said.

"There was a sign of equality between those based on science and those based on conspiracies, and this in my opinion is unacceptable with the role of the media, especially in a pandemic context," she added.

For the first time, in February 2020, the World Health Organization used a new term called "infodemia" referring to the large influx of news about COVID-19, many of them untrue.

"The fake news was not born with the pandemic but because of the state of anxiety that was created and the lack of information," Londo explained, adding that in the eyes of the public the media has suffered a great deal of damage, further reducing trust in media and journalists.

"The phenomenon of spreading false news hurts even more those dedicated and correct media and journalists, and the loss of trust is not easy to recover from," she stressed.

BesarLikmeta is of the opinion that the closure of institutions and the centralization of information made citizens inclined to believe in conspiracy theories related to the pandemic.

"We have reported on the dissemination of fake news and what we have learned by talking to fact-finding organizations is that the fake news has also been disseminated due to the fact that the institutions have refused to provide information, have refused to be transparent to journalists and that has affected public confidence", he said.

"At the moment when there was no information, at the moment when they did not allow journalists to do their role, people tended to believe conspiracy theories that were imported from abroad, that were transmitted on social networks," Likmeta added.

Lawyer Dorian Matlija is also of the opinion that the lack of transparency from public institutions has enabled the spread of false news.

"Blocking information and replacing it with propaganda has had a detrimental effect on calming the public and managing panic, causing citizens to turn their eyes wherever they can to be informed, as long as the government has not allowed them to do so." he said.

"This was the ideal environment for fake news to flourish as well," Matlija added.

ECPMF Legal Advisor Flutura Kusari stressed that it is unfair for fake news to be worn only by journalists, despite the various problems that the media has, as there are often companies and individuals unrelated to journalism and producing untrue information for financial or political purposes.

"I think it is unfair to wear fake news to journalists," she said.

Journalist Inva Hasanaliaj points out that many of the fake news published during the pandemic were related to COVID-19 vaccines.

"After the production of the first anti-Covid vaccine came the second wave of fake news which was related to its effectiveness or side effects," she said.

"During this time I have also communicated with major vaccine companies such as Pfizer or BioNtech to clarify to the audience about the effects of vaccines produced by them," Hasanaliaj added.

According to journalist Armand Bajrami, the fake news virus last year was not limited to vaccines, but reached courtrooms.

"The inability of journalists to be present in court proceedings, but also the lack of sharing through official channels of information on certain situations that occurred in courtrooms has stimulated fake news," he concluded.

The article in local language:

<http://gazetashqiptare.al/2021/07/01/mungesa-e-transparences-stimuloi-shperndarjen-e-infodemise/>

Opinion-Komente

Mungesa e transparencës stimuloi shpërndarjen e infodemisë



Lexime

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Nga Klodiana Lala dhe Merxhan Daci

*Natyralisht* **fab**

Transparenca e institucioneve publike shënoi një rënie të theksuar gjatë vitit 2020, duke lehtësuar përhapjen e një vale lajmesh të rreme, të cilat rritën hendekun e mosbesimit midis qytetarëve dhe medias.

Kur në marsin e shkuar në Shqipëri u shënuar rasti i parë i infektimit të një qytetari me COVID-19, me shpejtësi institucionet nxituan të mbyllnin dyert, të kufizojnë qarkullimin e mjeteve dhe të vendosin masat e distancimit social, në përpjekje për të parandaluar përhapjen me shpejtësi të koronavirusit të ri.

Gazetari i televizionit A2 CNN, Armand Bajrami e gjeti veten larg sallës së gjyqit, ku për 13 vite kishte ndjekur procese nga më të ndryshimet dhe i kishte përcjellë ato tek publiku.