Cumulative Report on Debates in the "Ethics" section on the MediaForum Platform

Period: March 25 2015 – 1 March 2016

Overview

During March 25, 2015 – March 1, 2016, 9 debates were conducted in the section "Ethics". The discussions addresses a wide range of issues related to the daily work of journalists. All topics were selected based on their topicality as well as real situations existing at that time (*ex: the debate around the publication of images from the private life of some people was generated by the publication of a video with the former Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, on the Internet).* The topics were selected to reflect different types of journalism: TV, online, print media, etc. The topics were proposed by the Content Manager of the platform or by the facilitator, and agreed with the Project Director.

Topics and debate process

It was agreed to discuss the following topics:

1. **"Moderation of comments on websites. What criteria should be observed?"**
Given the fact that at the time of preparation and launch of the debate, a case (Gender Doc-M vs PRO TV) concerning the disparaging comments posted by users was under examination in courts, while another trial (Oleg Brega vs Privesc.eu) had already ended with the sanctioning of the media resource, we found it appropriate to discuss on comment moderation issues, since there are no express provisions neither in the law nor in the Code of Ethics, about the selection of comments. All commenters agreed that messages with disparaging content and immoral language should not appear on websites. Opinions were divided in terms of the way of moderation; some users were in favour of "manual" moderation of the comments,

that is blocking the comments considered injurious, while others supported the idea of exclusively "technical" moderation, that is – by using filters or systems in which the comments that received negative votes from a certain number of participants are automatically hidden.

Having analysed the suggestions of the participants in the discussion, the facilitator, Ludmila Andronic, supported the idea of blocking only the comments that contain insulting and offensive words, in order to avoid being accused of censorship, and recommended introducing in the Moldovan Journalists' Code of Ethics some "specifications for the online media", which, in her opinion would shade more light into this issue.

2. "Press releases: how should we use them?"

The idea of discussing this subject arose as a result of the increasing number of news items published in the local media, many of which are taken over from press releases of government agencies. Two areas of this topic have been addressed: taking over information vs the presumption of innocence and the disclosure of details about one's private life. A communicator also took part in the debate and explained the way press releases are prepared and made recommendations to journalists. The debate was useful by readdressing the usage of information sources by journalists. Both, during the debate and in the final report, facilitator Ludmila Andronic recommended journalists to use press releases as *one of the* information sources rather than taking over from them content that is manipulative or not in line with the professional deontology.

3. "Has not answered the phone to provide comments…"

This discussion has focused around another "phenomenon", which is quite frequent in the Moldovan media: replacing the reply of the concerned person with phrases like "could not be reached" or "has not answered the phone". Participants in the discussion were journalists and media managers, which disapproved of this practice and invoked cases from the journalism activity, when the concerned people were deliberately "hiding" from the media questions.

In the recommendations made at the end of the debate, facilitator Alina Țurcanu suggested developing a case study that would help identifying the ways for journalists to obtain the reply of the person concerned, "within the scope of the Code of Ethics and the common sense". Based on the case study, recommendations shall be drafted for journalists, perhaps by the Press Council.

4. "When rumour is hoisted to the rank of news…"

This topic was agreed upon with the facilitator, Alina Țurcanu, in order to bring arguments against another practice that is detrimental to the media – taking over or forging and information. This practice that has been rapidly spreading with the increase of the number of news websites, which are in a permanent race to get as big a number of users as possible. The aim of the facilitator was to answer, together with the participants in the discussion, a number of questions that arise as a result of the analysis of this phenomenon. Users were invited to say whether such cases are the result of some deliberate actions or just some mistakes coming from the desire of the media outlets to be the first who deliver the news. The opportunity of introducing sanctions for this kind of infringements of the Code of Ethics was also addressed.

Overall, 7 people participated in the debate. The facilitator justified the low presence of comments by the fact that *"the Moldovan media is not used to debating important subjects related to the behaviour of the media representatives, in a serious, unbiased, collegial, self-critical way, using arguments."* The opinions expressed were quite diverse – there were people in favour and against. Some said that publication of false or partly true news is a result of journalists' attempt to give "spiciness" to the information in order to add that dose of entertainment that consumers are allegedly looking for in the news. However, others disapproved of these practices, considering them a manipulation tool targeted against specific people.

The facilitator recommended bringing into discussion the issue of false news, within seminars, round tables, conferences with the participation of journalists, but also of the subjects of news, the media consumers, and the specialists in various areas "who could speak about the impact of such news (from psychological, legal, social, and economic viewpoint, as appropriate)". In addition, in the final report, Alina Turcanu suggested encouraging media consumers and people who have been directly concerned by false news to report to the Press Council, "perhaps through a social media campaign", as well as punishing "any 'side-slip' and unprofessional actions by the editorial offices" and imposing administrative sanctions.

5. "Manipulation and sweeping the topics of the day under the carpet"

Publication of biased news, which distort the reality, and change of the agenda of the day by the media through deliberate replacement of the topics of public interest with others that are less relevant, have determined the facilitator Liliana Barbarosie to suggest this issue for discussion and to bring recent examples to justify the need for the debate. The 7 participants agreed that information manipulation practices of hiding important topics are sooner or later revealed, and the information gets to the public, which is the one who makes the ultimate choice. According to some of the comments, the social media has a role to play in the uncovering of such information, since there is no censorship and there is a free flow of opinions and information.

6. "Truncated quotes: manipulation, bad-faith or lack of professionalism"

In this debate, the facilitator, Liliana Barbarosie, continued the topic of information manipulation and spoke about a different technique – the use of truncated quotes. The selection of this topic was motivated by the fact that, at that time, a similar case was reported in the information space of Moldova. Only two comments were made during the debate – users said that these are not mistakes but rather deliberate acts of the journalists, which aim at promoting some interests or hiding critical opinions.

In both debates, Liliana Barbarosie recommended conducting some case studies that would explain clearly the ways of manipulation by truncating the quotations or by changing the topic of the day, as well as reporting this problem to the Press Council and the Broadcast Coordinating Council.

7. "Why is it not allowed to publish bedroom photos taken without protagonists' permission"

The appearance, in October 2015, of some video images that captured intimate scenes from the life of a politician, has reopened the discussions around "Private life vs accurate information". Vasile Botnaru accepted to facilitate the discussion, which gathered a total number of 26 comments. Some users agreed that the media should react every time other media outlets violate the right to private life of any individual, not only of politicians or public figures. In his final recommendations, the facilitator proposed studying and taking over the practices of international media outlets for applying punishments in such cases. "Ad-hoc expert analyses should be conducted by some managers of media outlets to which everyone aligns", Vasile Botnaru advised in the report. In addition, the facilitator suggested that the discussions on topics of applied ethics should be also transposed "among some teenagers to help them define their ethical principles as early as possible, not only in the profession of journalism".

The last two debates in the Ethics section: "**How do we write about the dead"** and "**What is the role of Moldovan bloggers?"** gathered 3 and respectively 2 comments, which speaks about the low interest of journalists in subjects that are not related to an "acute" fact. Vasile Botnaru has tried to treat one of the topics addressed by the Media Forum in October 2015, specifically the ethics of writing journalist items about deceased people. Vitalie Calugareanu has thrown down the glove to the bloggers, trying to identify along with the participants whether bloggers should also follow the ethical rules specific for journalism.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the scale of the discussions and the diversity of opinions, the main recommendations made by the facilitators in the Ethics section relate to supplementing the discussions on the Mediaforum with "live" thematic actions:

- Organizing seminars, conferences, roundtables where the topics addressed in the online debates would be discussed;
- Studying, in various ways, the journalism ethics practices existing in notorious foreign media outlets;
- Conducting some case studies that could help Moldovan journalists understand some professional issues;
- Organizing actions aimed at explaining to teenagers the ethical principles of using information about private life; this is necessary particularly in the light of the increasing popularity of social networks;
- Regarding the moderation of comments on the websites, it was proposed to introduce a provision in the Code of Ethics about the management of messages posted by readers;
- Conduct/commission ethics expert analyses by foreign experts, which would be useful for the Moldovan media.