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The journal is devoted to addressing contemporary issues and future developments related to interdisciplinary academic discussion, the results of empirical research, and the mutual interaction of expertise in media and information studies, media education as well as their sociological, psychological, political, linguistic, and technological aspects.

Apart from these areas, other interesting articles and contributions offering new perspectives and solutions relevant to media, communications, education, strategic management, and business, are welcome and will be considered for publication in the journal.

All articles are double-blind reviewed. Internationally renowned experts from the academic and research community are involved in the process of anonymous double-blind reviews. Thus, the journal offers authors an opportunity to improve their texts using anonymous reviews in accordance with the best academic and research standards.

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MEDIA MANIPULATION UNVEILED: ARE PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SPIN ANY DIFFERENT?

Zaneta Trajkoska PhD

Abstract

The construction of reality through media manipulation has long been a focal point for communication theorists. Noam Chomsky, in his analysis of media systems, emphasized that media outlets often serve the interests of the powerful elite through the „manufacture of consent.“ This concept underscores how information is filtered and shaped to align with dominant agendas, creating narratives that favor those in power. Public relations and spin-doctoring, two sides of the same coin, often work together to achieve this goal. Public relations professionals craft messages that are pleasant and attractive to the audience, aiming to build positive perceptions of their clients. Spin doctors manipulate facts and frame issues strategically to present them more favorably or divert attention from central matters. Their purpose is to cultivate consent or, as Chomsky would argue, to „engineer opinion“ in favor of elite objectives. In this modern media-political construct, the audience plays only an episodic role, often passively consuming narratives designed to align their views with the elite’s interests. Both public relations and spin-doctoring contribute to a multi-layered system where information is disseminated strategically through media outlets, shaping public perception while testing or diverting attention away from controversial policies.

Keywords: media manipulation, spin, public relations, propaganda

Introduction

The construction of reality through media manipulation, analyzed by theorists like Noam Chomsky and Teun A. Van Dijk, reveals a nuanced understanding of how power and control are exercised in society. Chomsky's critique of the media as a tool for „manufacturing consent“ intersects with Van Dijk's exploration of manipulation as an ideological discourse—both highlighting how elites shape perceptions to maintain dominance.

In the Balkans, where political landscapes are often turbulent, these methods of manipulation are frequently employed by politicians. Public relations and spin-doctoring in this region go beyond mere image management; they are part of a broader strategy to control public opinion and secure power. Chomsky's concept of media manipulation aligns with Van Dijk's notion of triangulation, where discourse, cognitive understanding, and societal norms are manipulated to favor a specific narrative—often simplifying complex issues into dichotomies of „us“ versus „them.“

These tactics are employed to influence the cognitive processes of the public—shaping how people perceive, process, and comprehend information. This is evident in the Balkans through the strategic dissemination of information that diverts attention from pressing issues or tests controversial policies. By manipulating cognitive dimensions, politicians are not just disseminating information; they are actively engaging in what Van Dijk calls „mental manipulation,“ (Van Dijk, 1998, 2001) where the goal is to subtly shift ideologies and knowledge in their favor.

This approach to manipulation—viewed through the lens of power, dominance, and abuse—illuminates how politicians utilize media and communication strategies to establish and maintain control. It reveals a multi-layered relationship where the public, often unaware of the manipulation, plays a passive role in a carefully constructed narrative designed to reinforce the power of the elite. Thus, in the context of politics, public relations and spinning are not just tools for crisis management but foundational elements in the ongoing struggle for political dominance.

To fully grasp and analyze manipulation, particularly in its discursive form, it's crucial to understand the social environment and the prevailing power structures within it. Scholars such as Clegg, Luke, and Van Dijk highlight the importance of recognizing how certain groups or elites dominate and use their power to influence and control public discourse. This influence extends across various platforms, including parliamentary debates, news media, educational materials, and digital content, which Van Dijk emphasizes as key avenues through which elites shape public perception and thought. In the Balkans, this understanding is particularly relevant. The region's political elites use their control over media and public discourse not just to manage day-to-day politics but to perpetuate their own power. By controlling the narrative through these channels, they manipulate public opinion, often shaping the psychological and ideological constructs of individuals. This process involves not just the dissemination of information but the strategic framing of issues in ways that maintain the status quo and suppress dissent.

Moreover, the manipulation goes beyond the mere control of media outlets; it extends into education and other societal institutions where information is conveyed. This systemic manipulation, while often presented under the guise of legal and ethical communication, in reality, often breaches ethical norms and undermines democratic principles by distorting the truth and restricting the free flow of information.

Thus, when analyzing manipulation in the context of politics, it is essential to consider the broader socio-political environment and the methods through which elites consolidate their power. These methods include not only controlling public discourse but also framing educational content and influencing cultural narratives, all aimed at maintaining their dominance and control over society. The use of these strategies highlights the inherent challenges in distinguishing between legitimate persuasive communication and unethical manipulation, underscoring the need for vigilance and critical analysis in understanding these dynamics.

In the context of modern online media, manipulation becomes even more pervasive and difficult to detect. The success of manipulative efforts hinges on their integration within groups, organizations, or institutions that can measure their impact on public opinion and behavior. In today's digital age, manipulation can be orchestrated by political elites, media organizations, educational institutions, businesses, or other influential entities. Digital manipulation aims to influence beliefs, ideologies, and opinions to provoke specific reactions. Online platforms provide manipulators with tools to refine their discourse by leveraging algorithms and data analytics to process information in ways that maximize recall from people's memory. These strategies often focus on words, images, sentences, and non-verbal signals that trigger cognitive biases and emotional responses.

For instance, the strategic placement of content on social media feeds or news websites, coupled with engaging headlines, provocative images, and sensational sub-headings, amplifies the prominence of certain information. When users see this content repeatedly in prominent positions, they are more likely to recall it and integrate it into their understanding of the world. This recall process influences their perceptions and judgments, shaping opinions in line with the manipulator's objectives.

Modern online media thus acts as a powerful platform for disseminating carefully curated narratives designed to resonate with specific target audiences. The algorithms that power social media platforms can also reinforce echo chambers, making it easier for manipulative content to entrench itself within communities of like-minded individuals. As people „recall“ the most recent and repeated information they've seen, they form judgments heavily influenced by this manipulative digital discourse. This underlines the importance of understanding how the online media environment shapes our perception and the need for digital literacy to critically evaluate the vast array of information we consume.

The discursive manipulation assumes how the perceiver understands the information and how processes it. For example, following the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, and after the bombing of the Spanish trains in 2004, the conservative Prime Minister of Spain, Jose Maria Aznar, tried to convince the global public that it is not Al-Qaeda behind the attacks but the terrorist ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna/ Basque Homeland and Freedom). With this approach, Aznar and his ministers wanted to change the image of ETA to suit the policies they planned to take towards this terrorist organization. Furthermore, Aznar wanted to increase his rating among voters, especially among those who are of right-wing prominence. One more modern example is the use of social media during the 2016 Brexit campaign in the UK. Pro-Brexit groups employed targeted advertisements to emphasize immigration and national sovereignty concerns. By leveraging data analytics, they carefully curated their messages to trigger emotional reactions, significantly impacting public opinion and contributing to the vote to leave the EU.

Another instance is how certain narratives around COVID-19 vaccines proliferated on social media. Some groups spread disinformation about vaccine efficacy and safety, often linking vaccination to personal freedoms being threatened. This discourse, framed through posts, videos, and selective data, shaped social beliefs and behaviors, leading to vaccine hesitancy in certain demographics. Van Dijk points out that such manipulation relies on blending personal and social beliefs. People from the same group or class might react differently to the same message because of diverse personal influences. Thus, understanding the impact of manipulative messages requires considering both internal and external factors.

The objective of this manipulative discourse is to control how a group or population is perceived socially, as these perceptions significantly influence public opinion over time. For example, by consistently framing immigration in negative terms, political figures can shape public sentiment to support stricter immigration policies. This type of ongoing discourse requires little additional input to maintain the established narrative, effectively solidifying public opinion and voting behaviors in favor of parties that promote these views.

MAIN STRATEGIES FOR MANIPULATION

In terms of importance of the social presentation in the interaction and public discourse, the manipulation always, or almost always, focuses on the social understanding of things and how it affects the general attitudes of the group or of the society. That is why there are several strategies for influencing society. One of them is generalization, which has a better impact and stays longer in the memory. The most significant example in this context is the manipulation that the USA did after the attacks of September 11, 2001, both in the country and globally as a justification for fighting terrorism. This manipulation was based on the generalization of emotions, common fear and behavior, and ideology when it is about terrorism or a similar ideology. This is a “genius” example and when there is talk about mass manipulation of a particular social representation to cause a reaction in society, that is exactly what happened. Therefore, the budgets of both the United States and its allies for military actions, weapons, and personnel were dramatically increased, thus increasing the growth of the military industry several times. Furthermore, the then Bush administration managed to pass legislation that suited the Republicans and the elites that span conservative America with much fewer immigrants. The people of the USA thought that by supporting such a policy they would be saved from terrorism, but not that they were doing a favor to the elites around George Bush (Ahmed, 2005; Chomsky, 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Halliday, 2002; Palmer, 2003).

This manipulation was partly supported not only by the media outlets in America but also by the transnational media, which shows how the manipulation works on a cognitive level. More specifically, the attack on the Twin Towers was used to emphasize the already high emotions and to develop an even greater debate about the differences between “us” (in this case Americans, but also all citizens who are good and innocent) and “them” (the representatives of evil, the culprits of the attack). Then by repeating messages such as “other terrorist attacks will also follow” as a model that is easily generalized, the foundations of anti-terrorist ideology and strategy are laid (Sidel, 2004; Zizek, 2002). The only thing groups or the public need to be convinced of is that the new policies that should be supported are for their own good, which is the opposite of the truth - it is done primarily for the good of the manipulators and their collaborators. According to Van Dijk, the manipulation of social understanding is also done by sharing knowledge. A good example of this is the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the justification of America and its allies for

such intervention. The “knowledge” of the existence of weapons of mass destruction changed the opinion of the planetary public about attacking Iraq and supported the United States and the alliance around it. Unfortunately, this “knowledge” of the existence of such weapons later turned out to be false. However, the media outlets have already “marked” the terrorists and the rulers of Iraq as radical, bad, cruel, murderers that use bombs and kill innocent victims. These attributes are generalized over time to the extent that they become everyday things when it comes to presenting such a group to the media public and putting it in the context of a certain event. When it comes to the threat of terrorists and their actions, the anti-terrorist discourse highlights values such as human rights, the value of equality, but most of it emphasizes security, which receives a higher priority compared to all other values (Doherty and McClintock, 2002).

It is crucial to point out that discourse manipulation mostly “happens” in public communication that is controlled by the dominant elites. The strategy of positive self-promotion and negative promotion of “others” can be applied at different levels, almost according to a clearly defined pattern: positive self-promotion, negative promotion of the others, justification of one’s policy or action taken, blaming others, and using attack in public discourse, highlighting the positive or negative aspects of others, accusations and localization of meaning and other small but important things relating to semantics, language, visual aspects, rhetoric, etc. The general strategy of the manipulative discourse is to focus on the cognitive and social characteristics of the perceiver that make him more vulnerable and less resistant to manipulation, to make him a willing victim who will embrace other people’s beliefs and do what it would never have done before.

The dominance and inequality of positions in society play a serious role in the success of the manipulation. According to Van Dijk, when we talk about the manipulative discourse, it is to the greatest extent semantically focused on the manipulation of the context of the text and the word. When implementing the manipulative plan, common tools are used, such as positioning a certain topic or its “concealment”, proposing “logical” explanations, manipulating explicit and implicit information, metaphors, rhetoric, expression during the transmission of the message, voice, tone, position, etc. An additional instrument in manipulation is the use of a person who has a certain authority or function that carries that authority. If the specific person has a certain credibility in the public, then the story is even more successful. The emotions of the people are used in dramatic events or when highlighting meanings that are relevant for the whole society, when discrediting opponents, and in full polarization of relations. All these factors should be taken into account when analyzing the impact of manipulation, especially discursive manipulation.

Manipulation in modern media is a sophisticated endeavor that crafts reality to serve its creators’ interests. According to Pleios (2011), we have transitioned from the „news writing age,“ where news was transmitted unaltered, to the „information age,“ characterized by the strategic construction of reality. This new era marks a significant shift from earlier times, such as the „public speech age,“ when events were interpreted through the lens of political ideology.

In today’s media landscape, information is not merely reported but manufactured within media outlets to appeal to and engage audiences. This production often prioritizes attractiveness and pleasantness over factual accuracy. The information presented to the public is selected and shaped—not necessarily reflecting the actual events or relevant facts from the social, political, or any other sphere of life. Researchers suggest that this strategy displaces the focus from core news to peripheral issues, transforming the objective dissemination of information into a commercialized content model.

As a result, the public's understanding of reality is largely molded by what media outlets choose to present. Most people only perceive the reality as delivered by these outlets, remaining unaware of the actual happenings. This leads to a predominantly passive audience that absorbs curated media realities without the practice of critically evaluating or questioning the content. In essence, today's media consumers are often spectators of a constructed narrative, rather than active participants in a dialogue about their world.

With the emergence of digital media and social media, media outlets now have an additional obligation to be able to disseminate information on all platforms promptly and as quickly as possible. The fact that information begins to spread from the moment it is communicated and the audience begins to interact and constantly has the opportunity to engage in a dialogue is a new challenge for the media outlets today, but also for political communicators. In this way, an opportunity is created through digital media for different people from different backgrounds and different groups to find themselves in one place, even virtually, and to discuss the same things, that is, to enter into a dialogue (Jenkins, 2008: 256-257). This means that the world is in a constant information circle, which does not stop. Everyone can engage in an ongoing dialogue from anywhere on planet Earth and contribute to putting a particular issue on the public agenda. Digital media made it possible through blogs, social media, Internet portals, virtual meetings, and debate places. This really improves the initial position for implementation of human rights at the global level, primarily the freedom of speech, but at the same time, it is also a danger. According to Chomsky, the Internet is full of people who are illiterate, which influences the public discourse and the changing of general attitudes (Chomsky, 2013).

The digital media also brought something else - an opportunity for greater manipulation and a good tool for all communicators, regardless of whether it is persuasion, politics, propaganda, manipulation, public relations, or spinning, that is, twisting of information. The instruments are different, and the channels of communication with the audience are changing, but what remains completely the same is winning over the public and its opinion on your side. The trend of quick and easy information made it possible for the information to reach the audience in an easy way, but also resulted in an audience that makes quick decisions and creates attitudes that are not based on awareness, but on superficiality. Quality and analytical information become a luxury for many, but hardly anyone asks for more information due to the lack of time and their own passivity. Digital media has made it possible to win over the public, and influencing its views happens while it (the public) is sitting at home in front of their computer.

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY: THE CORNERSTONE OF PR'S SURVIVAL

Public relations, in its modern form, emerged in the United States during the late 19th century. The 20th century brought PR to an academic level, developing theoretical research that explored the processes through which professional standards and ethical principles evolved. Despite this growing academic framework, it's crucial to remember that PR is rooted in practice and should remain closely connected to the professionals who refine it in practical contexts. The profession is often defined as „the art of silently manipulating public opinion, consumer attitudes, and politicians“ (Encyclopedia of Public Relations, 2006). Public relations, popularly known as PR, is sometimes seen as spinning the truth for selfish interests, where organizations, lobbyists, or individuals seek to „sell“ a particular idea, product, or policy for their own gain.

On the other hand, PR professionals, scholars, and educators view the field as one that fosters two-way communication between organizations (industries, institutions, political parties) and the public whose opinions can influence their success. Despite varying perspectives, all agree that the profession's ethical premises, moral obligations, and professional standards must remain paramount for PR to thrive. The power of language must be wielded in alignment with professional and ethical standards, clearly distinguishing public relations from manipulative practices like propaganda.

The international associations that include practitioners and professors that increasingly single out the public relations profession as distinct and separate from all other professions agree that public relations is a set of managerial, supervisory, and technical functions that improve the ability of the organization to listen, respond and value those individuals that have some kind of relationship with the organization, but also an interest that corresponds to the interest and mission of the organization (Heath, l.: 2005). They point out that PR professionals are problem solvers and counselors who will give the best advice to those leading the organization on how to best present themselves in the environment and how to communicate in the best way possible with the use of tools of the profession for communication with citizens, the media outlets and the public as a whole.

Ive Lee, one of the founders of the contemporary PR practice, believes that the person in charge of public relations works to bridge the relationship between the organization and the people that can help or hurt its work. According to Ray Eldon Hiebert (1996), Lee worked to position the profession as central to public communication in the industrial age, because Lee understood the need to use words to explain to people certain activities or attitudes of the communicator. Public relations use many forms, instruments and strategies. Communication with media outlets and creating good relationship with them are those that are most often used, in order to place the desired information in the media outlets. Part of public relations is also informing and persuasion, and lately negotiation and joint decision-making have become extremely important in the profession as processes in which the objective of the PR professional is achieved through involvement and discussion.

One of the most famous practitioners and theorists of the profession and the best one in creating consensus in the public was Edward Bernays. He believed that the biggest challenge for the practitioners was to respond to the public: "The public demands information on a daily basis and also expects to be accepted both as judge and jury in those public affairs that are relevant for all" (1923: 34). He also emphasized that this profession must be the focus and separated from advertising because the attempt is made with public relations to place certain information in the media without paying for it.

John W. Hill provided a widely recognized definition of public relations in the 1960s. He argued that PR should thrive in environments with dynamic public opinion, where practitioners are rewarded or punished by the public's trust. Practitioners, he believed, earn the right to operate successfully by effectively „serving the needs or demands of the people“ (1958, p. viii).

Hill emphasized that public relations professionals should ensure the public is well-informed; otherwise, people may withdraw their support for an organization or initiative. According to Hill, the primary role of PR professionals is to connect different interest groups and provide accurate information. When challenges arise, they can use persuasive skills to represent a particular side, interpret the facts, and take actions to achieve success. However, Hill insisted that

integrity is crucial for PR professionals, even more important than common sense (Hill, 1963: 6). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) reinforces this commitment in its official documents:

“Public relations help our complex and pluralistic society reach consensus and function more effectively, contributing to better mutual understanding between different groups and institutions. Public relations serve to achieve harmony between private and public policies. To achieve these objectives, institutions must develop adequate relationships with many different audiences, such as their employees, members, users and consumers, local authorities, interest groups, those associated with the institution, as well as all other institutions, and with the whole society”.

James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) defined public relations as managing communication between an organization and its audiences. Some definitions view PR positively, highlighting its potential to improve society, while others see it as superficial, manipulative, and deceptive. Critics fail to recognize PR as a broader practice that benefits various stakeholders by strategically positioning information. As a result, the debate increasingly centers on the integrity of PR professionals and the need to restore trust in the profession. Without this trust, public relations will continue to be seen as a manipulative spin, and spin doctors will overshadow genuine PR practitioners (Theaker, 2002).

GOVERNMENT PR: BALANCING TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION AND SPIN

In democratic societies, constant communication with citizens is crucial. Governments strive to inform the public about their work and convince voters to support them in the next election. To achieve this, they often attempt to control and direct information flow to sway specific groups or influence public opinion. One key method governments use to manage and shape information is through lobbying and close ties with media outlets. As Margaret Thatcher's former press secretary, Bernard Ingham, remarked, this relationship is „primarily cannibalistic, because they feed on each other, and no one knows who is next on the menu“ (Ingham, quoted in Franklin 1994: 14). The mutual dependency creates a complex web of influence among governments, media owners, and political interests. This results in media outlets becoming less independent, increasingly influenced by political and economic interests, and constrained by regulations related to freedom of expression and the legislative process (Negrine 1994).

As a result, governments can effectively influence media agendas, creating tension between political elites and media outlets. Every statement can be scrutinized, perceived as a twist or spin. To counter this, many democracies emphasize public relations grounded in openness, transparency, and accountability to rebuild trust. Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) argue that the American model of public information offers a pluralistic perspective on government, but for optimal public relations, government institutions must adopt the same principles as large corporations.

Modern media manipulation strategies often rely on social media and digital tools to amplify messages and control the narrative. This allows governments to manage public perception more directly, strategically influencing political discourse and guiding public sentiment, sometimes blurring the line between legitimate public information and manipulative tactics.

According to Kevin Moloney, public relations is the profession of the decade, and the spin and the soundbite are the most important words of our era. Ewen points out that corporate PR is so widespread that “we live in a society in which at any moment human attention is influenced by games and plans of spin doctors, image creation specialists, communication consultants, people in charge of informing the public and for public relations, making it pointless to set any boundaries between them...” (Ewen, 1996: 19).

The manipulative root of PR is most noticeable in America, where modern public relations were born, to defend the business interests of big companies (McElreath, 1997:8). Habermas believes that the relationship between the government and public relations is negative towards the public sphere and there is a direct intervention in it with a specific objective. He emphasizes that the community that is composed of business and the government that should take care of the society as a whole, not only reduces the meaning and importance of the public sphere but it is again “refeudalizing it”. Irwin Lee said back in 1921 that publicity is mostly a question of mass psychology because, according to him, people are mostly guided by sentiment and emotion, and not by reason. In a public relations lecture at Columbia University, he invited journalism students to visit the library and see the vast number of titles on psychology and how it creates a psychological effect on a mass of people. He added that the one who wants to deal with public relations should learn and understand the emotions and factors that influence people and what it is that convinces a person to take a certain action. According to him, psychology was one of the main factors in the success of the public relations (Ewen, 1996).

Today, if it counts to have a future, PR must neither be defined by nor in any way related to, propaganda and manipulation. Habermas, on the other hand, claims that PR and propaganda cannot be separated or viewed separately (Habermas, 1962:193–6). In his historical analysis of the development of liberal public opinion and the public sphere concept, he points out that public relations use publicity to maintain and represent their own market interests. Habermas argued that Bernays and other creators of modern public relations are drawing a line of equality between PR and the management of people’s opinions by emphasizing certain public interests and reducing the importance of their own private interests, and very often concealing it. According to him, pro-business PR was an American production that came to Europe after 1945. On the other hand, Herman and Chomsky (1988) present the “propaganda model” as a way to explain the behavior of the American mass media that serve social and political elites to “construct consent”. In doing so, they start from Lipman’s explanation that propaganda is a permanent structure in popular governments.

While public relations research and theory primarily draw from social sciences and rhetoric, limiting the study of this profession to these fields would be restrictive. PR significantly impacts culture, shaping the choices made and the image of power presented to the public. This influence extends to human emancipation. Cultural studies investigate PR’s political significance because every message reflects a specific articulation of power.

Cultural policy theorists believe that understanding PR can drive social action, policy change, and democratization. Turow (1995) argues that PR research should expand its theoretical support into political science, sociology, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary approach reveals that PR influences various aspects of social life and contributes to shifts across many segments of society. By understanding PR’s multifaceted role, we can better grasp how this profession helps shape cultural norms and public perceptions.

SMOKE AND GLASS STRATEGY

Public relations professionals are often labeled as manipulators, spin doctors, and propaganda machines, resulting in a generally negative public perception. This contradicts the theoretical view that PR should function at a managerial level, relying on interdisciplinary knowledge and professional integrity. Consequently, PR is often reduced to media relations, and everything else is dismissed as communication manipulation.

Media outlets have reinforced this perception by broadly using the term „spin doctor“ to describe anyone working in communication and public information. Whether strategically planned communication or the „smoke and mirrors“ approach intended to blur and twist reality for acceptance, both fall under this label. These manipulative strategies have shifted information dissemination from an objective model to a commercial one (Robert L. Heath ed., 2006), leading people to unquestioningly accept media reality as the truth. The passive attitude of audiences has made these tactics more prevalent and successful, turning perception into reality.

The debate among practitioners as to whether there are differences between public relations and the spin or whether they are actually the same profession is the reason for the negative image about this profession. Those saying that no one should be ashamed of the spin and that it should be practiced in the daily work, claim that they represent the interests of the client, and thus of all stakeholders. For them, truth is relative. The users of spin strategies are mostly concerned with the use of framing as a model of communication and agenda-setting, and they derive the foundations of these models from the theory of communication sciences. An additional reason for these claims is that spinning was used even before its popularization, and, according to Grüning's theory, it is the press agency model or, according to Edward Bernays, it is the construction of public opinion. The supporters of spinning also make the absolutist claim about the moral decision, that is, that the spin actions are moral insofar as they contribute to positive change in society. In contrast, the opponents of equating public relations and spinning say that spinning is unethical and misinterprets and twists the truth. They claim that spin doctors are not concerned with creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and its audiences and that, ultimately, they are not interested in that. Since spinners do not have socially responsible behavior on their agenda, the practitioners say that spin doctors are journalists that are only temporary visiting that profession and that their task is only to earn their salary by writing (Robert L. Heath ed., 2006).

Public relations are often perceived as a „black profession“ due to differing definitions and practices that can blur ethical boundaries. Some theorists believe PR should encourage positive behavior change and social progress through strategic management, while others argue that its primary role is to bolster an organization's image and reputation. This debate leads to spin doctors being labeled as manipulators who distort media reality.

National PR associations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)¹. and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) condemn spinning as manipulative propaganda that intentionally misrepresents information. They distinguish it from ethical PR practices,

¹ www.prsa.org ; www.cipr.uk

which emphasize truthful, realistic, and strategically managed communication. Nevertheless, the manipulation of media and politics continues to cloud the profession's image. PR strategies often influence public perception through curated narratives, creating an illusion of truth that can sway opinions and policies. This influence, combined with the rhetoric of power and politics, underscores the need for interdisciplinary research. As Turow (1995) notes, expanding PR research into political science, sociology, and cultural studies will help unravel the profession's complex impact on culture, politics, and societal change. By understanding PR's multifaceted nature and emphasizing ethical communication, the field can reclaim its role as a tool for positive social progress.

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COMMUNICATION DIMENSIONS OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AS COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION OF ORGANIZATIONS

Pedja Ašanin Gole²

Abstract

In light of the communication constitution of organizations and the perspective of neo-institutionalism, the purpose of the present research was to reveal the communication dimensions or characteristics of corporate governance as an institutional framework of public relations. For a systematic review of scientific articles in the field of public relations, we used the Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA). After an initial review of scholarly article databases, we narrowed our search to the primary scholarly journal in the field of public relations. We identified 19 communication dimensions of corporate governance and related concepts and condensed them into ten. The originality of this research lies in the identification of key communication dimensions of corporate governance as an institutional framework of public relations. The results of the research confirm the important role of communication in the processes of institutionalization of corporate management as a meaning-making process and confirm that communication is of constitutive importance for organizations.

Keywords: communicative constitution of organizations, corporate governance, institutional framework, neo-institutional theory, communication dimension, public relations

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Introduction

All organizations, including companies, are always in some kind of interaction with the environment in which they operate, and the fundamental expression of social interactions is communication. Organizations exist and are constituted through communication, and communication has a constitutive effect on organizations; organizations that do not communicate cannot exist. Organizations come into existence primarily in and through practices of communication and language use. The communication constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective gives a particular emphasis on the formative role of communication in constituting organizational phenomena of various kinds. The fundamental and constitutive importance of communication for organization (as an entity) and organizing (as a process) acknowledges a growing number of publications and proponents of the CCO are unified in their view that organizations are evoked and sustained in and through communication practices (Schoeneborn, 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2014; Blaschke and Schoeneborn, 2017; Boivin, Brummans and Barker, 2017; Dawson, 2017; Schoeneborn, Kuhn and Kärreman, 2018; Vásquez and Schoeneborn, 2018; Wenzel and Will, 2019). Organizations must therefore be understood primarily as communication phenomena. A communication-centered conceptualization of organization is what characterizes organizational communication as a research field.

The context in which organizations operate is the constantly evolving expectations and demands of the social, economic, and political environment. In neo-institutional theory, these expectations are understood as an institutional framework that simultaneously enables and limits the operation of the organization (cf. Scott and Meyer, 1983; Powell, 2007; Scott, 2014; Diogo, Carvalho and Amaral, 2015; Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020). Into this constantly changing social, economic, and political environment comes mutual interaction with organizations that operate in this environment and are managed within the structural assumptions of external expectations and demands. These structural assumptions of environmental expectations and demands towards organizations are the institutional context in which organizations operate, and one of the more important institutional contexts for companies is corporate governance. The latter represents the institutional framework of expectations of the socio-economic and political environment that directs and controls companies (cf. IoDSA, 2016; The Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, 1992) and refers to the institutionalized interactions between different actors in this environment (Bevir, 2010).

Every organization communicates whether it has a formal organizational public relations function. The public relations function enables companies to identify and respond to social demands (Marschlich, 2022) through social interactions, with organizations using purposeful communication (that is, strategic communication) as a fundamental public relations tool. Within these interactions, shared understandings of meanings, norms, values, and cognitive schemas are created. Communication thus has a meaning-making process, and public relations transfer common understandings of meanings, norms and values from the external organizational environment to the organization and vice versa: public relations transfer the organizational meanings of norms, values and cognitive schemes from the internal to the external environment and therefore play a key role in maintaining organizational legitimacy (cf. van Ruler and Verčič, 2005, van Ruler, 2014). To maintain their stability and, above all, legitimacy in the environment in which they operate, members of organizations unify these external expectations and demands of the environment towards organizations by spreading meanings among organizational members. By spreading or-

organizational meanings among stakeholders and key publics in the external environment, organizations achieve mutual understanding and acceptance within the context in which they operate. And this is the fundamental purpose of public relations, which organizations express through strategic communication.

Organizations are therefore based on communication and are in constant interaction with the environment in which they operate, regardless of whether they have a formal organizational function of public relations or not. The function of public relations enables organizations to recognize and respond to social demands through social interactions, using purposeful communication (that is, strategic communication) as a fundamental tool of public relations. Within these interactions, shared understandings of meanings, norms, values, and cognitive schemas emerge. Thus, public relations play a crucial role in maintaining organizational legitimacy, as they convey shared understandings of meanings, norms, and values from the external organizational environment to the organization, and vice versa: organizational meanings are transmitted to the external environment. By expanding meanings among organizational members, external expectations and demands become internalized, aiming to preserve organizational stability and legitimacy. Simultaneously, by disseminating organizational meanings among stakeholders and key publics in the external environment, mutual understanding and acceptance of the organization are achieved within the context in which it operates. This, indeed, is the fundamental purpose of public relations. In this article, we are interested in interplay the connection between public relations and corporate governance as an institutional framework in which organizations communicate.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AS AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Modern societies have numerous institutionalised rules that provide a framework for organisational design and functioning. These rules arise from public opinion, educational systems, laws, professional practices, and environmental understandings within formal organisations, evolving through social interactions and subjective interpretations of social constructs. An institutional framework refers to the structured set of formal (legal regulations) and informal rules, norms, conventions customs and norms of behaviour that shape socio-economic activities, behaviour and interactions of actors within a specific context (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991; Scott, 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2015; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016). It provides the foundation upon which organisations operate and interact with their environments. The social construction of reality is, in fact, shaped through interaction (Scott, 2014, p. 117).

The division between ownership and management in companies necessitates mechanisms to align business operations with the interests of the company, its owners, and other stakeholders. This alignment is achieved through an interactive decision-making process and a set of voluntarily agreed-upon rules that define, guide, and oversee the behaviour of actors, known as corporate governance (cf. Berle and Means, 1932; Commission on Global Governance, 1995, pp. 1, 3; IoDSA, 2016; Rosenau, 1995, p. 13; The Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, 1992). Corporate governance comprises both formal rules and procedures, as well as informal conventions, customs, and norms that shape socio-economic activities and organisational conduct. Formal and informal rules, customs and norms of corporate governance represent the institutional framework within which companies must operate.

Corporate governance refers to the institutionalised interactions among various actors involved in directing and controlling business operations: shareholders, supervisory board members, managers, employees, customers, financial institutions, regulators, and the wider community. It involves processes, patterns of behaviour, policies, and legislation that influence how a company is directed, managed, and controlled (Ansell and Bevir, 2013; Bevir, 2010). These mechanisms aim to protect owners' rights, reduce managerial opportunism, achieve business compliance, mitigate information asymmetry, and manage stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, corporate governance serves as a framework for decision-making and pursuing fundamental values such as transparency, responsibility, and justice (cf. Ansell and Bevir, 2013; Bevir, 2011; Frantzeskaki et al., 2009; OECD, 2015).

Corporate governance encompasses a system of regulations, procedures, informal conventions, customs, and norms that shape socio-economic activity and organisational behaviour (cf. Cornelissen et al., 2015; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991; Edelenbos and Meerkerk, 2016; North, 1998; Scott, 2014). Organisations internalise rules, norms, and shared meanings derived from principles and best practices, reflecting the behavioural patterns of corporate governance.

The concept that organisations are deeply embedded in institutional frameworks suggests that organisational practices often reflect or respond to rules or structures in their broader environments. Although there is no single definition of corporate governance, literature reviews indicate three common features from both institutional and stakeholder perspectives; (1) **Direction and relationships:** Corporate governance involves directing, defining the rules of the game, and managing relationships within this framework (cf. Bevir, 2011; IoDSA, 2016; Kjaer, 2016; North, 1998; Rhodes, 2007; Rosenau, 1995; The Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, 1992); (2) **Stakeholder involvement:** It includes regulating relationships between owners, managers, and other stakeholders with a legitimate interest in the company (cf. IoDSA, 2016; OECD, 2015; Tricker, 2019, 2023); (3) **Stakeholder management:** It encompasses managing relationships with stakeholders (cf. Câmara and Morais, 2022; IoDSA, 2016; OECD, 2015; Sogner and Colli, 2021)..

Stakeholders are central not only to corporate governance, but also to public relations, which is an organizational function that establishes and nurtures mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Grunig, 1992; Sriramesh and Verčič, 2019). Establishing and internalising the institutional framework (in our case, it is corporate governance) requires company members to achieve common meanings of the dimensions of institutional change. Communication activities are pivotal in all institutional processes (Suddaby, 2010) and influence organisational behaviour and formation. Public relations, as a strategic communication practice, provides insight into strategic stakeholders, their concerns, expectations, interests, social issues, and the public. In turn, stakeholders, and the key publics gain timely insights into the organisation's strategic directions, enhancing their understanding of the organisation's motives. Frandsen and Johansen (2013) claim that the function of public relations is key in many processes of institutionalization, and the essence of public relations in these processes is communication, i.e. interpretation - the translation of regulatory, normative and cognitive schemes of the environment into the organization (Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

The influence of neo-institutional theory on organisations, manifested through institutions (that is, norms, rules, customs, cultural-cognitive schemes, etc.), significantly impacts organisational practices (North, 1998; Scott, 2014), including the practice of public relations. Public relations play a key role in institutionalisation processes, with communication translating regulatory, normative, and cognitive schemes of the environment into the organisation. Communication is a meaning-making process through which organisations co-create shared social meanings (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). Public relations manage relationships between the organisation, its stakeholders, and the public through strategic communication. Indeed, public relations, as an organizational practice, is shaped and implemented through interactions between organizations and their environments (cf. Culbertson et al., 1993; Hallahan et al., 2007; Sandhu, 2009). Formalised public relations functions are essential for establishing connections with stakeholders and publics, facilitating mutual understanding and acceptance of the organisation within its operating context. Formalised public relations functions are essential for establishing connections with stakeholders and publics, facilitating mutual understanding and acceptance of the organisation within its operating context. Moreover, organizations require a formalized public relations function to establish connections with stakeholders and publics that can either enhance or hinder the organization's ability to fulfil its mission. Managing these relationships involves planned and purposeful actions that benefit the organization and its environment, as well as society as a whole. These connections emerge through social interactions, where shared understandings of meanings, norms, values, and cognitive frameworks are shaped using purposeful (strategic) communication – a fundamental tool of public relations. As a result, public relations transfer the external organizational environment's meanings related to norms, values, and other aspects to the organization, and vice versa: organizational meanings are conveyed to the external environment. By disseminating these meanings among organizational members, expectations and requirements from the external environment become internalized, contributing to organizational stability and legitimacy. Simultaneously, by sharing organizational meanings with stakeholders and key publics in the external environment, mutual understanding, and acceptance of the organization within its operating context are achieved.

Therefore, it is important to investigate the key dimensions of corporate governance studied by public relations researchers, as these dimensions connect corporate governance and public relations. Examining the relationship between corporate governance and public relations reveals a broad literature lacking cohesion and a stronger theoretical foundation. Through a review of the scientific literature, this study aims to identify and document the key dimensions used in public relations in the study of corporate governance, simply called „communication dimensions of corporate governance“.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To identify and document the key dimensions used in studying corporate governance within the public relations literature, we used a methodological approach based on a systematic literature review using content analysis with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) method (Page, Moher and McKenzie, 2021). The PRISMA method follows a precisely defined four-step procedure (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion) for conducting a systematic literature review, ensuring methodological accuracy, transparency, and ease of replication.

We subsequently utilised meta-analysis, and for content analysis in the final step following the PRISMA method, we employed the Atlas.ti tool and conducted axial coding. Content analysis, a formal qualitative research method often used in public relations research, is defined by Brody and Stone (1989) as an objective, systematic, and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication. Qualitative content analysis involves creating concepts by searching for themes, keywords, and concepts, then categorising them, with the basic unit of analysis being the concept rather than the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 7). Our analysis is thus based on a meaning-focused approach rather than a language-focused one; we deal with meanings and categories, not narratives or discourses. When coding the texts, we also methodologically linked to thematic analysis, meaning that while reading the articles, we determined descriptive coding, grouped these codes into clusters, and finally formed overarching themes (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019, pp. 193–228).

For the qualitative analysis of texts, we used the software tool Atlas.ti, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. In processing the text data, we employed a combination of „top-down“ theoretical coding and „bottom-up“ open (partly also *in vivo*) coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pp. 101-121).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first PRISMA step (*identification*), we searched two major online research databases, Science Direct and Emerald, using the keywords “corporate governance” and “public relations” as well as synonyms for public relations: “strategic communication”, “stakeholders’ relationship” and “communication management”. This initial search yielded numerous articles that included these keywords, which directed us to the second step of the PRISMA method - *screening*. We limited the search to the leading journal in the field of public relations (*Public Relations Review*) with the keyword “corporate governance”. As a result, we identified 54 papers published between 1988 and 2023. It is noteworthy that we did not find articles prior to this period, which is logical since the term “corporate governance” was first used by Tricker in 1984, and the first code of corporate governance was established in 1992 (Cadbury’s).

In the third step of the analysis (*eligibility*), we excluded articles that mentioned the listed keywords but did not focus on the concept of corporate governance or its connection with public relations. Such articles could not contribute to identifying the dimensions of corporate governance in relation to public relations. Consequently, from the original 54 articles from the journal *Public Relations Review*, we included a total of 36 articles in the analysis. After completing these stages of the systematic review of the literature using the PRISMA method, we concluded that the relevant literature in the primary scientific journal in the field of public relations regarding corporate governance was exhausted. Thus, we proceeded to the meta-analysis within the framework of the final stage of the PRISMA method - *inclusion*.

We examined all suitable contributions through content analysis using the Atlas.ti tool. Most authors in the 36 suitable contributions aligned their understanding of corporate governance with definitions from the Cadbury report (The Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, 1992), OECD (1999, 2004, 2015), King’s Reports (IoDSA, 2009, 2016), or definitions by Aoki (2000), Aquilera et al. (2016), Cadbury (2000), Fiss (2008), Freeman and Evan (1990), Rhodes (2007) or Tricker (2019).

To gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between corporate governance and public relations, we further reviewed and counted the dimensions in each of the 36 included articles by their frequency of occurrence. In all the analysed articles, the relationship between corporate governance and public relations was defined by at least two dimensions. In total, we identified 19 dimensions that defined the relationship between corporate governance and public relations from a public relations perspective. However, many concepts were defined differently even though they referred to the same underlying idea. For instance, „stakeholder relationship management,“ „stakeholder collaboration,“ „stakeholder participation,“ „stakeholder inclusiveness,“ and „responsiveness to stakeholder expectations“ were terms used to discuss stakeholders generally or specific stakeholders (e.g., owners or board members). Another example includes „legitimacy“ and „social license to operate,“ referring to the same concept, and the third example includes „openness,“ „transparency,“ „access to information,“ and „provision of information,“ all representing the concept of transparency.

Therefore, in the next round of coding, we combined related concepts (using axial coding to group individual conceptual codes with similar meanings into overarching concepts), reducing 19 dimensions to 10 unified communication dimensions of corporate governance, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Dimensions of corporate governance in public relations’ scientific literature

In the analysed scientific texts, we observed a consistent use of key corporate governance concepts as defined by the authors of the Cadbury Report, the OECD, the King Reports, and others. This consistency highlights the robustness of the conceptual foundations in this research area, facilitating comparison between different studies and their integration into a broader framework for understanding corporate governance. Although researchers discussed similar dimensions in their articles, they used varying terms or perspectives. This diversity demonstrates the richness in understanding corporate governance and public relations, allowing for an in-depth analysis of these concepts and the development of flexible, contextually relevant communication strategies in the institutionalisation of corporate governance. Using meta-analysis with the PRISMA method, we identified ten central communication dimensions of corporate governance in connection with public relations. These dimensions are crucial for understanding the complex and multifaceted relationship between organisations and their stakeholders, and they can serve as a foundation for further research and the development of corporate governance practices.

CONCLUSION

The essence of public relations lies in generating common organizational meanings and interpretations—translating the expectations and requirements of the socio-economic and political environment, including regulatory, normative, and cognitive frameworks, into the organization (Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). Through communication, organizations create shared understandings and social meanings, which is a key process for public relations. The communicative function within organizations is crucial in all processes of institutionalization, including the institutionalization of corporate governance.

We have identified the key dimensions of corporate governance as discussed in scientific articles in the most important journal in the field of public relations (Public Relations Review). The identified communication dimensions connect the field of corporate governance with the field of public relations and provide valuable insight into the institutionalization of corporate governance. In this way, this research highlights the critical interplay between corporate governance and communication in the context of public relations. The communication dimensions of corporate governance and the common understanding of their meanings among organizational members play a crucial role in shaping organizational identity and, importantly, in establishing and maintaining trust among various stakeholders. The implications of this research are significant for practitioners in companies and organizations. Integrating the identified communication dimensions into corporate management and communication strategies can enhance the management of stakeholder relationships and the achievement of business goals in a dynamic and competitive environment.

These findings will aid researchers in the field of corporate governance institutionalization by providing a deeper understanding of its communication dimensions. Simultaneously, they will benefit researchers studying the institutionalization of public relations within the framework of corporate governance, which involves institutionalized interactions among numerous actors directing and controlling business operations.

Our findings are particularly important in light of the perspective of the communicative constitution of organizations and neo-institutionalism. Implementation, that is, the institutionalization of corporate governance as an institutional framework in companies, depends on the interpretation and creation of common meanings of the main characteristics of corporate governance within organizations. Without the creation of common meanings of norms, rules, values, and cultural-cognitive schemes of corporate governance, its institutionalization in companies can be merely formal and therefore unsuccessful. Communication has a meaning-making process and is therefore key in the processes of institutionalization of corporate governance.

In conclusion, our discussion confirms the importance of thoroughly understanding and managing the relationship between corporate governance and public relations. It underscores the need for further research and practical application of these insights to achieve sustainable and successful business operations in modern society.

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DIGITAL MEDIA AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON STUDENTS

Maja Mitevaska-Poceva

Abstract

The development of technology and the creation of Artificial Intelligence (AI - Artificial Intelligence) progressed. It is a gradual process, which is upgraded with time and technological progress. Continuous research and development of new methods, algorithms, and techniques lead to achieving machines' desired levels of intelligence. Artificial Intelligence AI is a broad branch of computer science that deals with building smart machines capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence. It is a highly innovative area of research and development that permeates many aspects of our society, including education. In recent years, the application of AI in education has seen significant growth and has the potential to change the way we learn and teach knowledge. It can change the way learning is done, improving and personalizing the educational process. In this paper, we will look at the role of artificial intelligence in education and some of its most significant aspects. Learning with artificial intelligence aims to improve student learning and teaching. Artificial intelligence in education seeks to reduce the barrier that currently exists between formal teaching (in class) and the autonomous and independent learning of students. The goal is to promote common methodologies in knowledge building and the stimulation of autonomy. For this, personal communication systems (Internet, mobile devices, etc.) are used outside the traditional spaces where the learning process was developed. Artificial intelligence can contribute to the continuous assessment system by monitoring student performance in real time and predicting possible difficulties that may arise during education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, learning, education, intelligence

Introduction

Digital media is a form of electronic media where data is stored in digital form. It can refer to the technical aspect of storing and transmitting information or to the „end product“, such as digital video, or digital art. Digital media are more and more present in our society and as such we could not imagine everyday life. Through them, we inform, educate, express, etc. It is a matter of time whether digital media will completely replace print media, but in any case, they are well on their way to doing so. However, it is not negative, considering that we are an information-digitalized society, and we use computers and the Internet more and more and we could not imagine our everyday life without them.

The influence of digital media in education is the subject of a large number of research and considerations in the modern education system. With the rapid advancement of technology, digital media are becoming an integral part of learning and teaching, changing the way students engage, interpret information, and develop skills. However, digital media are not only tools for the transmission of information but also experiences and means for innovative learning and teaching. This study aims to explore the impact of digital media in education, focusing on their role in enhancing student learning and development as well as their application in classrooms. Through a literature review, data analysis, and exploration of theoretical concepts, this study seeks to identify and examine the various ways in which digital media influences student learning and development. Every aspect of the use of digital media in education will be analyzed, including their impact on student motivation, engagement, communication skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Referring to the positive and negative aspects, we will try to draw conclusions that will support educational institutions and teachers in the process of planning and bringing innovations into school practice.

Through this study, we hope to explore the deep connection between digital media and education, as well as to suggest practical approaches to their effective use in the school environment. A critical analysis of the positive and negative aspects of the use of digital media in education will allow us to identify the challenges and opportunities that these technologies offer us. From this analytical approach, we hope to derive conclusions and recommendations that will be useful for educational institutions, teachers, and students in the process of adapting and improving learning through digital media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical development of digital media begins with the advent of handheld computers in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1940s and 1950s, handheld computers were large, cumbersome, and expensive machines that were used mostly for military purposes and scientific research. Over time, technology developed and computers began to appear that were smaller, better, and less expensive. In the 1960s and 1970s, computers began to be used in various fields, including education. Many universities and scientific institutions have begun to use computers for research and education. At the same time, the Internet was developing as a communication network between various scientific institutions and military bases. The first forms of electronic mail and online forums began to appear, allowing people to communicate and share information over the web.

In the 1980s, personal computers became available to the general public, paving the way for the wider use of computers in homes and in education. With the advent of interactive educational programs and multimedia content, computers have become an integral part of learning and education. During the 1990s and 2000s, the Internet became globally available, transforming the way people communicate, learn, and work. With the advent of social media, online educational platforms, and virtual classrooms, digital media has become an indispensable part of education and society as a whole.

Today, digital media are of great importance to education, providing access to a large number of educational resources, interactive textbooks, and collaborative learning tools. With the continued advancement of technology, digital media is expected to continue to evolve and have an ever-increasing impact on the way we learn, work, and live. Digital media presents itself as a cardinal part of modern society, introducing major changes and innovations in various aspects of our lives. In education, their meaning is particularly significant, although it can also be spread to other spheres of our everyday life. Initially, digital media allow students to access a vast amount of information and resources, which causes a significant improvement in the educational process. Through the Internet and electronic resources, students can access the latest scientific research, educational videos, virtual field trips, and many other resources, which enrich their learning and build their knowledge capacity.

In addition, digital media improves students' communication skills, offering opportunities for interaction and collaboration through different platforms and applications. Through virtual classrooms, discussion forums, and online collaborative tools, students can share ideas, work on joint projects, and learn from each other, without the limitations of physical presence. It is also important to point out that digital media encourages critical thinking and creativity in students. With activities such as analyzing media content, creating multimedia projects, and experimenting with new technologies, students are encouraged to think critically, express themselves creatively, and find innovative solutions to problems. However, although digital media have many positive aspects, the potential danger of their improper use should also be highlighted. Abuse of social media, addiction to video games, and exposure to inappropriate content can have negative consequences for students, including loss of concentration, learning delays, and social problems.

Digital media play a key role in improving education, enriching learning, and encouraging student development. With proper use and control, they can be a powerful instrument for progress and innovation in education. Today, the media is a very important part of a young person's everyday life. Without a doubt, many young people spend most of their day in front of the TV or in front of their computer, much more than with their family or at school. Many experts claim that in terms of education, the media has taken the place of the school and the family in modern society.

With the rapid development of technology and the use of cable and satellite television, home theater, Internet, etc., the use of electronic media has suddenly grown. According to some, this offers a greater choice of products and services for users, according to others, all media offer is, in fact, a variation of one or several of the same things. On the other hand, technological development has made cell phones, cameras, and computers much cheaper and much more accessible, allowing users to simultaneously become producers and creators of media texts and messages. The ubiquity of commercial influences in modern society has not left the media untouched either. Several public or state radios and televisions are now just one of the many choices on our remote control. In contrast, the world is dominated by private media corporations that own a wide variety of media (newspapers, magazines, television, publishing houses, video game industries, film productions, etc.). Naturally, those who have the financial power (private media corpo-

rations) are at an advantage over the state ones because they can create better media content and gain as much audience as possible. Advertising, sponsorships, etc. penetrate more and more deeply into the public sphere and influence the editorial policy of the state media.

Hence, the media fight for as many audiences as possible, because that's how companies that want to advertise are attracted, and ads are the biggest source of profit, which is usually the ultimate interest of the media owner. That is why the media will very rarely produce and broadcast media content that is against the interest of their owners or, on the other hand, the interest of those who advertise in those media. The way we understand ourselves and others is largely due to the content we create and receive through the media. The ubiquity of images, information, music, etc. in our lives has created an opportunity to understand ourselves in a variety of ways, the choice of idols, examples, personalities, and stories with which we compare ourselves is much greater and consequently the way we understand and experience ourselves (our identity) has more layers. Also, our relationship with family and friends is changing, and with it the culture itself. One can talk less and less about a specific „Macedonian culture“. The songs we like, the movies we watch, socializing through Facebook, the fashion choices we make, etc., we communicate all this with people from other parts of the world and thus share many common cultural practices (behaviors), that are not Macedonian, but global.

In the world today, radio, television, computers, and the Internet are our dominant cultural tools for searching, selecting, collecting, storing, and transmitting knowledge. There is no longer a distinction between traditional and digital media and one can read a newspaper, watch TV, and film on a computer or mobile phone. However increasing knowledge through the use of mass media and communications has both its advantages and disadvantages. While adopting their good points, we should try to avoid the negative ones. That is why we need to develop media literacy, especially among children, a population born and raised with new information and communication technologies, present both at home and at school.

Research and practice in the last two decades show that young people are getting along with the Internet, new media and technologies. In the past, it was enough to know the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets to be able to read. Technical knowledge is now necessary, but also comprehensive education about what media and media content are. And they are an ocean in which you must have knowledge to navigate, an ocean that is a whole new world in which you communicate differently and which changes everything. Media programs the habits of young people when it comes to their use and way of seeing the world, influencing expectations regarding interpersonal relationships, personal attractiveness, success, fame, health, problems, and their solutions. Worldwide research and data indicate that children are among the most faithful viewers of television content (an average of about 4 hours) and active users of Internet content, although given their sensory, physical, and cognitive abilities, they are the least prepared for it. Therefore, many developed countries began to include media education in the curricula of primary and secondary schools more than a dozen years ago.

Already in 1964, UNESCO encouraged the idea of media education, which would increase media understanding and develop critical media awareness among young users. The path to the democratic upbringing of children is wide open and outlined in many European documents and recommendations that advocate a democratic and civil society that will protect the rights of citizens and children to be informed and protected from uncontrolled media production. The European Center for Media Competences points out that the terms „media literacy“ and „media competencies“ are often used interchangeably today. Media literacy sometimes refers to skills related to a particular medium, such as computer literacy, or a group of media such as technological or digital literacy, while media competencies include all these different types of literacy, i.e. not just the skills, but also the knowledge and expertise.

Media competence, which is often treated as a cultural technique, means „the ability to navigate the world of media in a critical, reflective and independent way, with a sense of responsibility, using media for independent and creative expression, etc.“ It is the key skill in work, education as well as in leisure and important for all target groups in society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Internet and the mobile phone, beyond their entertainment nature, offer a new form of socialization, exchange, and access to basic knowledge for children and adolescents today. These new technologies represent a huge opportunity to improve the quality of life of young people around the world and put an unlimited amount of knowledge with just one click in all the basic areas of their existence (education, health, science, culture, etc.). But the progress of the digital age is not without a price. This virtual revolution has created dangers and risks, often like those in the real world, that young people face online. This research is based on a qualitative approach, which allows for a detailed analysis and interpretation of the complex aspects of the influence of digital media in education. The application of qualitative methods enables a detailed understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and opinions of the research participants. The primary source of data was a survey that was distributed to students and teachers in different schools. The survey contained a combination of closed and open questions, which allowed for a detailed analysis of the various aspects of the application of digital media in education. Data obtained from the survey were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative text analysis methods. This included identifying themes and trends in the participants' responses, as well as analyzing the frequency of certain expressions and concepts. In addition to the survey, interviews were also conducted with teachers and students, which enabled additional details to be obtained about their experiences and perceptions regarding the use of digital media in education. The research methodology aims to enable detailed and exhaustive research on the topic and provide relevant and significant results that will contribute to the improvement of education through the integration of digital media in teaching.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

To be able to reach the right answers about the application of digital media in education through which we will get to know the positive and negative aspects of the influence of electronic media, we analyzed the answers received from the respondents. The survey questionnaires were intended for students and teachers (appendix 1 and 2). This research includes 120 students aged 14 and 15 from 6 primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. Based on the questionnaire, we can conclude that more than 90% of students use digital media. About 70% could distinguish the advantages of using digital media, while about 60% could perceive the negative aspects of using digital media in education, specifically in the learning process. They all have access to digital media both at home and at school. The number of students who are not able to use digital media at home is very small, but they do so at school. In contrast to them, from the analysis of a survey questionnaire for teachers, it was established that teachers also use digital media almost daily. As the most commonly used digital media, they single out presentations and video materials, but after monitoring online teaching during the COVID pandemic, they are already making extensive use of e-textbooks and interactive sites. They consider that digital media have a great positive influence on teaching and mastering the teaching material more simply and interestingly. However, teachers also perceive the negative aspects of the use of digital media, es-

pecially in encountering a large amount of misinformation and how to deal with it. They express their attitude from insufficient familiarity with media literacy. They believe that first of all they need additional training where they would expand their knowledge on this topic and implement it even more successfully in front of the students. When asked where they use them the most (in which subjects), the largest number, that is, about 76%, do it in courses in natural sciences or working with computers. A small number of teachers use digital media in other subjects.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In modern conditions, people are increasingly bombarded from all sides with informative, entertaining, and educational content, which conveys information using combinations of words, images, and sounds that reach all the senses, influencing thoughts and feelings, as well as the way of thinking and behavior. Therefore, to be a successful student, responsible citizen, or productive worker, competencies are needed for the „smart“ use of information from all available media. For that, they must develop skills that will help them understand messages and successfully use all the tools at their disposal to create and send their messages. In other words, being literate in the media-dominated digital age means possessing critical thinking skills, which not only enable the appropriate use and creation of media messages but also help in making relevant and responsible decisions in all other situations. from everyday living. Media literacy education is expected to enable students to access the media, analyze messages and evaluate the information they receive, create media messages themselves, and act, i.e. use the information they receive through the media safely and responsibly. This means that during the educational process, students should learn how to access the media to get the most different types of information, but also acquire digital skills to be able to effectively use the media and media applications, which are constantly changing and are being upgraded. After learning to access media content, students need to acquire skills to analyze media messages. Disinformation, fake news, media manipulation, and sensationalism are not equated with quality journalism, which is in line with professional standards. Therefore, the quality of the media is closely related to the development of media literacy. Media literacy contributes to quality and ethical journalism, and trust in the media through partnerships between the media, government institutions, and citizens, stimulating active citizen participation.

This research analyzes the influence of the state of the media and media literacy on the skills of journalists themselves to produce quality media products. The findings of the research show that the poor economic situation in which the media find themselves, as well as political pressures and the manipulation of media content to achieve political goals, are the main reasons for the decline in the quality of journalism in S. Macedonia. It contributes to media workers being easily vulnerable to direct or indirect pressure. There is also a close connection between the independence of the media and quality of media products, and the integrity of media workers, that is, respect for media standards and editorial culture are key to the quality of media products. Raising awareness about the role of the media as drivers of democracy in society is crucial, and improving the situation with the media should be treated as a strategic goal.

From the research itself and the responses from teachers and students, we can already see that the use of digital media has both positive and negative impacts. The process of data analysis and literature review enabled the collection of relevant information and the identification of several key aspects of the impact of digital media in education. We would mention the following as basic:

- **Increased motivation and engagement:** The results showed that students who use digital media in learning express greater motivation and engagement in the educational process. The interactive and visual aspects of digital media stimulate students to engage more and have positive learning experiences.
- **Improvement of communication skills:** The application of digital media in teaching contributes to the improvement of students' communication skills. Virtual discussions, online collaboration, and teamwork encourage students to develop their communication and collaboration skills.
- **Improving critical thinking and problem solving:** Students who use digital media in learning show greater ability for critical thinking and problem solving. Interactive content and problem-based tasks available through digital media challenge students to think creatively and seek solutions to various challenges.
- **Need for structured training for teachers:** The results showed that there is a need for structured training and support for teachers in the application of digital media in teaching. Teachers expressed a need for training and resources to integrate digital technologies into their classrooms.

Regarding what are the positive functions of digital media, we would mention the following:

- **Informative:** Digital media have the power to do many good deeds, allowing people to acquire numerous information that are significant for the environment, thus ensuring their right to be informed and to transmit that information. Digital media are key to creating impressions, experiences and feelings that allow people to understand the world.
- **Educational:** Nowadays, a key role in the spread of knowledge is played by the digital media, which, in addition to being informative and entertaining, also play an important role in the upbringing and education of their users. They provide quick access to information about historical, cultural, geographical, sports and other opportunities, or simply about everything we are interested in. They create new opportunities that young people use in the process of informal education.
- **Entertainment:** In addition to informing and educating us, digital media also contribute to solving everyday practical life problems. Nowadays, entertainment is necessary to reduce the tension of everyday fast-paced living, and it is primarily provided by the media.
- **Social networks:** There are many benefits of social networks. In addition to being able to communicate with people more easily and quickly, to be informed, to make contacts, to meet new people. Connect with people we already know or exchange content. They can also have the function of humanitarian, educational, professional platforms, platforms for advocating various social issues, etc.

In the further presentation, we will see what are the positive and what are the negative impacts of the application of digital media in education.

- **Simplifying access to educational resources:** Digital media provide access to numerous educational content online, including e-books, video lessons, interactive textbooks, and online courses. This increases the number of resources available to students, facilitating them in the learning and research process.

- **Interactive learning and engagement:** Digital media provide interactive learning content and tools that stimulate students to engage in learning. Multimedia content, virtual simulations and learning games make students ready and interested in learning.
- **Improving communication skills:** The use of digital media enables communication and collaboration between students and teachers through various platforms for online discussions, forums and virtual classrooms. This allows students to improve their communication and collaboration skills.
- **Individualized learning:** Digital media enable personalized learning, where students can access educational content and work at their own pace and according to their needs and interests. This allows students to develop their strengths and overcome their weaknesses.
- **Development of critical thinking and problem solving:** Using digital media encourages students to think critically, analyze information and find creative solutions to problems. Interactive tasks and learning games motivate students to explore new ideas and develop critical thinking.

We will mention the following as negative aspects:

- **Excessive use and addiction:** One of the main challenges of using digital media in learning is that addiction or excessive use can develop. This can result in a loss of focus and concentration in students, which can reduce their learning success.
- **Lack of interaction and socialization:** The use of digital media can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction and socialization between students and teachers. This can lead to reduced communication and teamwork, which are considered important elements in the development of social skills.
- **Digital disobedience and unnecessary embellishment:** Some students may face challenges in controlling their use of digital media, which can result in distractions and disobedience in the classroom. This can distract students from learning and reduce their academic performance.
- **Security challenges and risks:** Using digital media can expose students to security risks, such as internet abuse, cyber mobbing and access to inappropriate content. Insufficient training and awareness of internet safety can expose students to the dangers of the internet.
- **Technical challenges and lack of resources:** Some schools may face technical challenges and lack of resources to successfully use digital media. This can create disparities in access to education and exclude students who cannot have the same access to technology.

CONCLUSION

Digital media are more and more present in our society and as such we could not imagine everyday life. Through them, we inform, educate, express, etc. It is a matter of time whether digital media will completely replace print media, but in any case, they are well on their way to doing so. However, it is not negative, considering that we are an information-digitalized

society, and we use computers and the Internet more and more and we could not imagine our everyday life without them. The study of the positive and negative aspects of the use of these media has shown that they have great potential to enhance learning and improve the student experience, but also cause certain challenges and risks that need to be overcome.

The positive aspects, such as increased motivation, improvement of communication skills, and improvement of critical thinking and problem solving, are significant and have the potential to improve the quality of education. However, negative aspects such as dependency, lack of interaction and socialization, security challenges, and technical challenges require careful management and application of strategies to overcome them. This research offers important conclusions and recommendations for teachers, schools, and educational institutions for the successful integration of digital media in education. Through the implementation of appropriate practices and strategies, the potential of digital media can be used to improve education and prepare students to successfully deal with the challenges of the digital age.

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Annex 1

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

1. How often are digital media used in your classroom?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

2. What types of digital media are most often used in your classroom?

- Presentations
- Video materials
- Interactive websites
- E-books
- Other (specify)

3. What is your attitude towards the use of digital media in learning?

- I love him
- I am indifferent
- I do not like it

4. What do you think are the biggest advantages of using digital media in learning?

5. Do you think that you receive sufficient support and training for the successful use of digital media in learning?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

6. How do you rate your overall success when using digital media in learning?

- Better
- The same
- Worse

7. What types of digital media are most attractive to you and why?

- Video materials
- Interactive tools
- E-books
- Learning games
- Other (specify)

8. Do you have access to digital media in your home environment and how often do you use it for learning?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

9. What specific subjects or areas of learning do you find most appealing when using digital media?

- Mathematics
- Languages
- Science
- Informatics
- Other (specify)

10. How do you feel about your personal engagement and motivation when using digital media in learning?

- Greater engagement
- The same
- Less engagement

Annex 2

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

1. How often do you use digital media in your teaching practice?

- More often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

2. What types of digital media do you use most often in the classroom?

- Presentations
- Video materials
- Interactive websites
- E-books
- Other (specify)

3. In your opinion, what are the biggest advantages of using digital media in education?

4. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges and obstacles for the successful implementation of digital media in the classroom?

5. Do you think you have enough training and support for successful integration of digital media in teaching?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

6. Do you think that the use of digital media improves student results?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

7. How do you rate your abilities to use different digital tools in the classroom?

- High
- Intermediate
- Low

8. Have you noticed any differences in student engagement when using digital media compared to traditional teaching methods?

- Yes, I noticed differences
- No, I didn't notice any differences

9. Which specific areas of your teaching practice benefit the most from digital media?

- Mathematics
- Languages
- Science
- Informatics
- Other (specify)

10. What are your main challenges in integrating digital media in the classroom and how do you think they can be overcome?

- Lack of resources
- Insufficient training
- Technical problems
- Motivation of students
- Other (specify)

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THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC POLITICAL SPHERE

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Abstract

The emergence and evolution of the internet have reshaped the landscape of political communication and discourse, transforming it into a public sphere that transcends geographical boundaries and traditional hierarchies. This paper explores the role of the Internet as a platform for political engagement, communication, and mobilization. Reviewing different theories of the public sphere and empirical studies, it examines how digital technologies have democratized access to information, enabled diverse voices to participate in political discussions, and facilitated collective action. The internet's potential as a public political sphere is accompanied by challenges and controversies. Issues such as echo chambers, filter bubbles, and the spread of disinformation raise concerns about the quality and inclusivity of online political discussions. Moreover, the concentration of power among a few tech giants poses risks to democratic governance and freedom of expression. Despite these challenges, the Internet also presents opportunities for enhancing democratic practices and civic engagement. Platforms for citizen journalism, online petitions, and social media activism empower individuals to hold governments and institutions accountable. Moreover, digital tools enable marginalized groups to amplify their voices and advocate for social justice causes. If people can freely connect to the Internet without corporate, economic, and governmental restrictions, then the Internet can function as an open and democratic public sphere. This paper concludes by discussing future directions for research and policy interventions aimed at strengthening the Internet's role as a vibrant and inclusive public political sphere.

KEYWORDS: Internet, New Media, Politics, Public Sphere, Democracy

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Introduction

In the early stages of the Internet when traditional media still dominated the political process in terms of communication, the Internet was used as a secondary or supplementary communication channel. It published content and information that was prepared for mainstream media, press, and electronic media, without adjustments and additional content modifications. The very nature and infrastructure of the Internet, as a decentralized network, and the fact that no government has control over the Internet, makes it a suitable platform that can assume the role of a public sphere where individuals will participate in a global exchange of information. On the Internet, they can gather information, exchange ideas, and make informed decisions. Accordingly, individuals can convey their interests online in this new sphere, which today has transformed into a global communication network.

The media as a whole, like the Internet, serves the public by performing the important role of informing and creating a forum for public debate. The Internet thus contributes to the democratic process by opening a new space for public dialogue. The Internet, as a platform of the public sphere, emphasizes inclusion, participation, and freedom of expression. In the participatory democracy of the Internet, the citizen has real opportunities to take part in public debates and to influence political decisions. The development of new communication technologies and the Internet in the 21st century has expanded the opportunities for public communication. Participants in public communication can connect much more easily, select the content they will follow, personalize communication and, of course, take part in public debates, not only by following it, but also by publishing their own content, comments, and opinions. By sharing and recommending they also contribute to the validation and valorization of the media content, as information that has wider reach and dissemination become more important for the society.

In a large number of expert reviews, the claim that the Internet has revived the public sphere is debated and accepted as a revolutionary step forward. The aforementioned participatory and interactive possibilities of the internet have largely suggested vivid comparisons with Habermas' descriptions of the ideal public sphere. Comments on websites and social networks, the possibilities to share and convey our views and reactions, as well as the options to organize public events and form communication networks at any time, seem to largely justify such comparisons. Although the Internet and social networks have numerous drawbacks, it can still be said that public discussion has never been easier and more inclusive. The Internet enhances dialogue and information exchange, which is one of the fundamental categories for democratic political systems.

In the period before the emergence and development of the Internet on a global level, precisely these values, dialogue, and inclusiveness, were defined as key categories for democracy in a society. The Internet manages to overcome the problems of information control and filtering in centralized communication systems. Today, through online media, the decentralization of information sources and opportunities for inclusive public debate has become the new standard. They not only democratize the flow of information but also shape a new kind of culture, the so-called. „participatory culture“, ie a culture of open participation in public communication. Habermas, who criticized electronic media for „simulating face-to-face communication“, observes in the Internet the realization of some of his ideas and the transformation of the Internet into a new kind of public sphere. It can be affirmed, as Mark

Poster states, that „The era of the public sphere as face-to-face communication is over, so the development of democracy must take into account new forms of electronically mediated communication“ (Poster 1997, 220).

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to several authors, the Internet has the potential to function as a public sphere. In the printed edition of the popular magazine „Wired“ from 1996, the Internet was mentioned as a renewed hope that it could represent a new public sphere:

The public square of the past with its pamphlets and vigorous debates is being replaced by the Internet, which allows ordinary citizens to participate in the wide national dialogue, publish a newspaper, distribute electronic pamphlets to the world, and generally communicate with larger audiences than ever before. (The Internet) allows ordinary citizens to gain access to a huge and wide range of information (Warf and Grimes, 2013, p. 7-10).

The idea of the Internet and online media as a public sphere is accepted by a large number of authors, and the following can be distinguished:

- Yochai Benkler emphasizes the emergence of the new networked public sphere:
- „The easy approach to communicating in the public sphere through the Internet allows individuals to transform from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in active conversation. The Internet allows users to change their relationship with the public sphere. They no longer have to be just users and passive observers but can become creators and active subjects. In this sense, the Internet democratizes modern societies“ (Fuchs, 2014, pp. 1-2).
- Zizi Papacharissi describes the Internet as „the emergence of a virtual sphere 2.0“, in which citizens/users participate and express „disagreements with the public political agenda“. They express their opinions on blogs, by watching or posting content on YouTube, or by posting comments in various online groups.
- Manuel Castells emphasizes the innovations of the Internet as a new sphere: „Construction of the new public sphere, as part of the network society, progresses by building communication protocols between different communication processes“ (ibid.).
- Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue that YouTube is a „cultural public sphere“ because it „enables interaction of users with cultural differences and encourages the development of a following of the political Other who has different beliefs and identities“ (Fuchs 2014: 1-2).

The functional public sphere implies a series of communication conditions in society that allow the circulation of ideas, debates, and free formation of public opinion. In these newly created communication conditions, mass-media and new interactive platforms serve to provide communication links between citizens and power holders in society. Before the Internet, the press and broadcast media (radio and television) were media that were main parts of the public

sphere. They served to facilitate the formation of public opinion, but at the same time, they were characterized by limited access, for only selected individuals, and a limited number of people could publish content and information on them. This is the so-called one-way communication model in the traditional media, based on the dichotomy of publishers versus audience, or producers versus consumers of media content. The Internet, on the other hand, facilitates two-way communication, ie. users can receive and consume information but also react to information and create information and content that they can use in online communication. In other words, they are not just an audience but also potential and impactful communicators in public discourse.

People don't watch or just listen to the Internet like they do with television or radio. Instead, they surf it, program on it, post their own content and information, write comments, and keep adding things to it. Communication on the Internet is a social activity that involves exchange, give and take. The roles of reader and writer, producer and consumer of information are blurred and they often overlap. (Balkin 2013)

In „The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere“ Jurgen Habermas explains that „citizens function as a whole when they can organize and connect in a free way, and this is through freedom of public assembly, association, as well as freedom of expression and publication of their opinions on matters of general interest“ (p. 73). Just as a free press helps maintain a democratic society, a free and uncensored internet serves the same functions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this paper, it is essential to outline the methodological approach to investigate the Internet as a public sphere. In this research we discuss the rationale behind the methodological choices, detailing the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques utilized in this study. Our study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do internet platforms facilitate public discourse and participation?
- To what extent does the internet help inclusivity and diversity in public discussions?
- What are the main challenges and limitations associated with conceptualizing the Internet as a public sphere?

Additionally, building upon Habermas' theory of the public sphere, we conceptualize the internet as a multifaceted arena for communicative exchange and political engagement. We draw on key concepts such as accessibility, inclusivity, public debating, and the role of digital media in shaping public discourse. Given the exploratory nature of our inquiry, we employ qualitative research methods to capture the richness and complexity of online interactions. Specifically, we analyze textual and visual content from social media platforms, online forums, and news websites to identify patterns of discourse and thematic trends. Also, through an in-depth examination of selected online communities and digital platforms, we explore the dynamics of public engagement and community formation.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

According to many analysts, the Internet gave a new impulse to the democratic public sphere and helped in its revitalization. In that process, many of the previous shortcomings that critics had noted were corrected. In this context, the criticisms mainly referred to the fact that the public sphere before the age of the Internet, was public only in the sense in, for example, schools or health facilities are public. They are intended for everyone, but control over them is still one-sided, by smaller groups in society that control the conditions for communication in the public sphere. This is especially evident when the public sphere is analyzed through the role and functions of the mass media. They dominated the public sphere in the past and were a key factor in how it functions and what is the social role of the public sphere. The control over the mass media by a small number of people de facto drastically reduces its democratic capacity.

The Internet has changed the economics of the functioning of the media, it takes away the exclusivity that only those with huge financial resources and power can own and control the media. Then, the Internet dramatically reduced the costs of production and transmission of information and news, and the concentration of media (vertical, horizontal, diagonal) in a short time became a secondary topic of the theorists of democracy. (Bachovska 2018: 10)

Postmodernists, such as Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jean Lyotard, Ernesto Laclós, Chantal Mouffe, and others, criticized the public sphere from a position of dominance of the so-called „macropolitics“, i.e. the framing of the public sphere in the big political ideologies and in which the so-called „micropolitics“, or the voices of the smaller and weaker social groups, are subordinated (Kellner, 2001: 3). It is precisely this space of „micro-narratives“ that the Internet has largely enabled: the inclusion and circulation of micro-narratives, of the voices of smaller groups, of marginalized segments of societies, rebellious individuals and others, who through it have gained voice and participation in the new public online sphere. One of the specifics of this transformation, according to Kellner, is „the replacement of critical reasoning with opinions and subjective comments“, which is the dominant content that the Internet enables. However, the newly established pluralism of the internet offers new opportunities for articulating dissident and marginalized voices. In addition to voting, democracy also implies public debate, but also participation in public affairs. In the era of mass media, before the Internet, the majority of people were kept out of democratic debate and discussions, and through broadcasting technologies were reduced to „passive consumers of infotainment“ (ibid.). Access to the media is controlled by large corporations and only a small part of the spectrum of opinions and voices is included in the content these media circulate.

„In the era of the Internet, anyone with online access can participate in a public debate or discussion, that enable them to have political influence thus forming empowerment of large social groups that were outside of political discussions in the era of the mass media“ (Kellner 2001: 6).

In his analysis of the early 2000s, Kellner finds various illustrations for his theories and views, citing as examples the movements of the Zapatistas and anti-capitalist activists and how they used the Internet for new and radical political organizing. However, there is certainly room for

criticism of this new model of the public sphere, and the authors usually associate it with the fragmentation of information and groups that are active on the Internet. The Internet enables greater inclusion, but reinforces the fragmentation of different groups into „information micro-clusters.“ Between these groups, which are present on the Internet, there is no causal or dialectical relationship, he concludes. For Mark Poster (1997), the postmodern public sphere is based on the idea that it is „a mediated (new public) space, not a technology, but a space for communication flow and a place where our subjectivities cannot be firmly established, so they are the result of the influence of the very network in which they are involved“. This is a space where the participant in communication, The Subject, participates as a manifestation of „the post-structuralist concept of subjectivity that is completely different from Habermas' theories based on the autonomous and rational subject that is at the center of the public sphere“ (Poster 1997: 215). Poster elaborates in detail the aspects that make the Internet a new public sphere, and at the center of his analyzes and arguments are the so-called „virtual communities“, which are a synthesis of virtual reality technology with the Internet.

„Internet technologies impose a dematerialization of communication, and thus a significant transformation of the subject, that is, the individual, who participates in it“ (Poster 1997: 215).

The new public sphere, as Poster describes it, is based on this fluid subject that is drawn into online communication and in which „existing hierarchies of race, economic class, age, social status, and especially gender are weakening“ (1997: 224). The main criticism of Habermas's theories about the public sphere were the factors of exclusion of parts of society, so the enhanced inclusion (inclusivity) of the Internet fills the gaps of Habermas's public sphere, and the Internet is interpreted as an emancipatory and democratizing public space. In that sense, Poster argues, the Internet through virtual communities realizes Habermas's ideals of the public sphere by accepting and fulfilling its main functions as defined by Habermas.

One of the key features of the Internet, which is very important for the fact that it is slowly gaining a central place in the media system, is precisely that the Internet enables audience participation. What was once a marginal part of the media system, such as the ability to comment on websites or online forums, is now becoming a central function. The most important media and journalistic stories aim to attract the attention of the audience, with the effect of these contents being increased if they motivate viewers to engage in further discussions online and on social networks. With this key function of the Internet, the involvement of the audience, the additional value of information is created. The additional value that the information and contents receive on the Internet, through the reactions of the audience, affects the editing of the program framework of the media (the so-called „agenda setting“). The stories and online content that cause significant reactions and comments from the public get priority and additional coverage of the topic. With the development of the new participatory media culture, user-generated content is gradually increasing the pressure on traditional media. In that sense, the traditional media are also pressured to adapt to the habits that the audience develops on the Internet, This usually translates to increased audience involvement and reactions to the content, mostly through increased presence and posts on social networks, where the content is open for public discussion. The Internet as a public sphere has a strong influence on the media, but also on the economy, politics, and culture. One important peculiarity of the Internet, which goes in favor of its function as a public sphere, is the reduced importance of

social status as a factor in public discussion. The positive side of online platforms that offer the opportunity to participate in discussions and posts anonymously or through an arbitrary user-name, is that the user's social status is subordinated to his or her arguments, or „what is said is more valued than who says it.“ This sort of neutralization of social status helps egalitarianism, that is, it gives all participants in the public online discussion equal positions to present their arguments. Of course, anonymity on the Internet also has its negative sides, such as abuses in spreading misinformation or hate speech, which are facilitated and often followed by hiding the identity of the people who create and spread these contents.

Anonymity on the Internet has the potential to be beneficial in the formation of critical discourse because it promotes the free flow of ideas without privileging any of the participants in the discussions. When users can report or share certain information anonymously, they are more willing to contribute to public forums. It must be noted that complete anonymity is a complex issue on the Internet, as IP addresses, and other data, can be traced back to identify the user. Nowadays it is common, for example, for online media to have sections for commenting on the news, marking that the reader likes the article, or an option with a few clicks to share the content through different communication channels (social networks, e-mail, chat service, direct message, etc.). In cases where there are no comment sections on the websites themselves, the media and journalists encourage the discussion on their content by sharing them on social networks (Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) where users have various options to engage in a discussion. Readers can leave comments, reply to other people's comments, confirm agreement or support (by liking), or share further any information posted. Certain media outlets offer opportunities to rank content by number of comments and likes, or publish „top comments“ for the day or the week, also further encouraging discussion and participation in public debate. The researchers agree that the higher the number of citizens participating in politics is, the closer society gets to realizing the ideal of a public sphere. By facilitating communication in connection with elections and the political process, the Internet takes on a more important role in the democratization of society.

In political science studies, there are many terms that speak about the scope of the concept of digital democracy: electronic democracy, teledemocracy, democracy of the digital age, cyber-democracy, and „on-line“ democracy. The framework of digital democracy is the web (the networked world). Digital democracy is also defined as a virtual form that affects political processes, and it can also be considered as an electronic form of governance and articulation of different interests. (Bachovska 2018: 11)

The democratic potential of the Internet comes to the fore especially when it comes to inclusiveness of minority groups and communities. The Internet can enable disadvantaged, underrepresented, and marginalized groups to participate in discussions online. Social media and online discussion forums make it easy for anyone to initiate and participate in public discussion on issues of particular interest to them, or for issues of general public interest. For the stability of society, these groups must be included in the political process. This fulfills the key prerequisite that Habermas states for the public sphere, i.e. the inclusiveness of the public sphere. Members of smaller groups and minorities get the opportunity to represent their group or themselves without external pressures or conditioning. Because the Internet is inclusive the public can easily participate in democratic processes and discussions, both at local and global levels. The Internet can also initiate public debate and provide a forum enabling a sort of

political globalization, i.e. involvement of citizens from different societies in political debates of other countries, which could be potentially of global importance or interest, such as, for example, the presidential elections in the USA, the referendum and the debates surrounding Brexit, the trade war between USA and China, war conflicts and many other influential topics. Participation in public political discourse can result in a better-informed population on issues related to local, as well as transnational topics, creating better policies, increasing public trust, and preventing conflicts. Despite Habermas' view that the public sphere remains re-feudalized, he also states that there is potential for it to be revitalized. For this to happen, an environment must be created in which people can freely communicate and mobilize around issues of common interest. The Internet has transformed political discussions because it not only provides people with information, it also enables collaborative content creation, civic activism to fact-check public discourse and media content, and the ability for the public to produce and disseminate information themselves. The real value of the public sphere for democracy, which goes beyond the right to vote, is the offered opportunity to exchange ideas, to debate with others, and under the influence of this public discourse, to make political decisions.

Furthermore, the rise of blogs, as independent platforms for publishing user content, the broadband internet that enabled the mass exchange of data and content (through the so-called „peer to peer“ exchange), and the emergence of YouTube in 2006, changed the foundations of mass media. Traditional filters of information, controllers of the flow of information, as well as selectors of what topics are important, had to adapt to the new „participative culture“. The involvement of the citizens in the process of information creation and distribution, previously reserved only for selected groups and professionals, has double consequences. On one hand, it is an opportunity for inclusiveness and diversification, but at the same time, it is also a threat to media structures from losing their function and position in society, both in terms of communication and economics. The strengthening of these processes had an impact on academic circles and studies. The focus of media research has shifted to audience studies and the culture they develop on online platforms. Users are stepping into a sort of symbiosis with the media, but this time the symbiosis is more complex than in the era of the traditional media because it is an interactive process in which both components influence each other. The researchers emphasize the difference between interactivity and participation, in which participation stands out as an enhanced type of involvement that goes beyond simple interaction and implies a higher degree of activity. Some of the consequences of this symbiosis are an increase in the time users spend interacting with the media and, on the other hand, there is the evident expansion of the public sphere at the expense of the private sphere (Lister et al, 2009: 210). Audience research shows that often the interest in user involvement exceeds the technical possibilities provided for it. For example, in studies of the reality television show „The Big Brother“ broadcasted in Great Britain, it was reported that the interest in commenting and reaction to this show on Channel Four TV often crashed the servers and websites. Forums and comment sections were flooded with users eager to comment and share their impressions of this program (ibid.). This type of content is usually transmitted simultaneously through web streaming which, in addition to the television channels, allows viewers to engage with the program at any time. Analysts highlight this newly developed „desire to be part of the show“ as a phenomenon that is changing not only the audience's viewing experience but also the nature of the media sphere itself (Jenkins 2006). Henry Jenkins researched the relationship between the audience and the media to detect the changes occurring in the Internet age. He states that „New media have offered new tools and technologies that allow archiving, appropriation, processing, and republishing of media content, leading to the emergence of numerous subcultures that promote a new kind of ‚do-it-yourself ‚ production“.

Also according to Jenkins, a new type of „trans-mediality“ is being developed, which is changing communication trends and forming a new media culture based on enhanced knowledge about the programs. It encourages an enhanced flow of content, ideas, and narratives through various multimedia channels that create „new active models for audience tracking and engagement“. Increased audience involvement is also transforming media markets by changing the relationships between the participants themselves, and subsequently fragmenting the media market.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the Internet is a decentralized system with no single central control over it, how it functions as a public sphere can be controlled by external factors. The power of the corporate-controlled media in the circulation of information and the legislation in different states to some extent can determine the dynamics of how the Internet will function as a public sphere. The quality of the online public sphere depends on the diversity of the participants in the public debate and how political diversity will be included in the debates. However, the fact that the Internet tends to personalize and target specific audiences leads citizens to express their opinions in fragmented forms. This contributes to making it more difficult to identify different political positions and understand them by the majority of citizens in specific societies. The online public space cannot be localized, and it is difficult to create defined contexts for different political perspectives that are reflected in public debates on the Internet. The media are no longer able to keep citizens gathered in defined groups that are going through shared experiences. As Giddens states, „The Internet is blurring the distinction between home and workplace“. According to research, the time spent by the modern man at the workplace remains the same, while a quarter of the respondents confirmed to be working from home in addition to time spent at their workplace. So, life from classical dualisms of home and work, private and public, has merged into a continuous flow that is organized with the help of the Internet (Giddens 2005: 475).

„The Internet promotes and encourages mobility, not only in terms of communication, but also in terms of status, class, social role, and character“ (Stevenson 2003: 62). (Stevenson 2003: 62).

Stevenson here emphasizes the possibility of individuals changing their social positions and status, as one of the results of the information revolution. In contrast to traditional media that tended to centralize and create a mass audience, the Internet works in the opposite direction: it tends to personalize and fragment the audience to the extent that mass media will probably disappear, as a social integrator connected to geographical space and separate locations. In this way, the Internet undermines the national public sphere that was mediated through traditional media⁴. National state structures that are aware of the power of the Internet not only to inform the public but also to mobilize it, often reach to deal with these issues through direct control of the Internet. One of the notable examples was the events of November 2019 during the civil

⁴ Kai Hafez calls this a kind of „Babylonization of culture“, alluding to the legend of the Tower of Babel (The Myth of Media Globalization, 2007, pp. 103-104).

protests in Iran when the authorities completely blocked internet access in the country on several occasions in an attempt to cut off the organizers from each other and fragment the protesters from their usual coordinating of the protests⁵. The state apparatus in democratic systems through the instruments of control over infrastructure in exceptional circumstances can restrict who can connect to the Internet. This shows that the Internet as a public sphere still has its „gatekeepers“ who can control access to the Internet. Manuel Castells (Castells 2008) interprets these issues in one of his articles in the following way:

Global society now has the technological means to exist independently of political institutions and mass media. However, the capacity of social movements to change public opinion depends largely on their ability to shape the debate in the public sphere⁶.

According to Castells, if people can freely connect to the Internet without corporate, economic, and governmental restrictions, then the Internet can function as a public sphere. The Internet may provide a forum for public debate, but with the commercialization of information and mass media products and the corporate goal of making a profit, these ideals are still in danger.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the internet has undeniably emerged as a new public and political sphere, fundamentally altering the landscape of communication, information dissemination, and civic engagement. Through its decentralized nature and accessibility, it has democratized access to information, empowered marginalized voices, and facilitated unprecedented levels of interaction and participation in the public discourse. However, this transformation is not without its challenges, including issues of digital inequality, disinformation, and the erosion of privacy. Traditional control systems, like state apparatus can still impose their filters and systems of gatekeeping by restricting access to the internet. As we navigate these complexities, it is imperative to recognize the internet's potential as a catalyst for positive social change while actively addressing its limitations and safeguarding the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. By developing a public sphere that fosters constructive dialogue, critical thinking, and respect for different perspectives, we can harness the full potential of the internet as an inclusive public sphere for the benefit of global society as a whole.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Access to the Internet is still not universal, and certain demographic groups are underrepresented in online public communication. This digital divide can skew our understanding of the inclusivity and representativeness of the online public sphere. The algorithms and personalized

⁵ "Iran on Sunday introduced a near-total nationwide blackout of the internet, making one of its most draconian attempts to cut off Iranians from each other and the rest of the world, as widespread anti-government unrest gripped the streets of Tehran and other cities for a third day", Farnaz Fassihi (Nov. 17, 2019), "Iran Blocks Nearly All Internet Access" [online], New York Times, available at <https://is.gd/r48H05> (accessed 01/04/2024):

⁶ Castells, 2008.

content delivery mechanisms of the main digital platforms contribute to the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and constraining the deliberative potential of online discussions. Also, commercial interests and platform policies still shape the structure and dynamics of online public spheres, influencing the visibility of certain voices and the prioritization of particular issues. The fluidity of online interactions and the asynchronous nature of digital communication present challenges in capturing the temporal and spatial dimensions of the online public sphere, while the anonymity afforded by online platforms can facilitate the spread of disinformation and disorder, undermining the quality of public discourse and discussions. In regards to further research, comparative research across different countries and cultural contexts can shed light on variations in the functioning and impact of online public spheres, considering factors such as regulatory frameworks, socio-political climates, and media landscapes. Drawing on insights from diverse disciplines such as sociology, political science, communication studies, computer science, and psychology can enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between technology, society, and democracy in the digital age.

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THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA LITERACY ON THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Marija Davchevska⁷

Abstract

Media literacy plays a major role in the process of social integration of children with disabilities, enabling them to engage in the community according to their needs, interests, and opportunities. In many cases, these children can feel isolated or excluded from society because of their disabilities. Media literacy can provide them with access to information, communication with others, and the opportunity to participate in a variety of activities and experiences. The purpose of this research is to gain a more detailed understanding of the impact media literacy has on social integration among children with disabilities and to identify opportunities to improve their access to media literacy and social integration. The research is based on a survey questionnaire used as a data collection method from 15 parents of children with disabilities and 15 teachers. Methodology: The survey contains questions that explore the frequency of media use, the impact of media literacy on social integration, participation in activities through the lens of media literacy, challenges, and resources in using media literacy, as well as recommendations for improving access to media literacy for children with disabilities. Results and conclusions: The results showed that the implementation of media literacy can significantly improve the social integration of children with disabilities, by providing access to information, communication with the environment, and the opportunity to participate in various activities. Based on the obtained results, recommendations are provided for the development of programs and interventions aimed at supporting these children in society.

Keywords: media literacy, children with disabilities, social integration

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Introduction

In today's digital society, media literacy plays a key role in the development of the individual and social skills of children. Television, the Internet, social media, and video games – the media platforms provide a wide variety of content and interactions that have a significant impact on their social and cognitive development. In this context, researching the impact media literacy has on social integration among children with disabilities represents a significant aspect of the education and development of children with different types of disabilities. In recent decades, media literacy has become an inevitable part of our everyday lives and has a significant share in the way we communicate, learn, and have fun. The importance of media literacy in today's inclusive society is very big, therefore children with disabilities should not be left out in this process. Media literacy plays a major role in the process of social integration among children with disabilities, enabling them to engage in the community according to their needs, interests, and opportunities. In many cases, these children can feel isolated or excluded from society because of their disabilities. Media literacy can provide them with access to information, communication with others, and the opportunity to participate in a variety of activities and experiences. Media literacy consists of skills and competencies for understanding, interpreting and critically reading media content. For children with disabilities, who may face physical, sensory, cognitive, or communication challenges, accessing and participating in media culture may present additional challenges or obstacles. In many cases, these children may face barriers such as a lack of media resources and lack of support for using media in their learning and development. However, media literacy can be an important instrument for their social integration and participation in the community – an opportunity for them to explore different aspects of the world around them, to develop critical skills, and to help them build their social networks and relationships. Media literacy is not only important for the individual advancement of a person with a disability, but it is also relevant for promoting a complete societal change in terms of understanding, equality, and inclusion. Media literacy for persons with disabilities cannot be achieved solely through individual efforts. Media platforms and manufacturers of devices must take responsibility for ensuring accessibility and promoting inclusive representation of disabilities in their products and content. This entails investing in accessibility features, consulting with disability communities about design and content, and taking responsibility for violations of accessibility standards. Media literacy for people with disabilities is an essential skill to get by in our world today. The research on the impact of media literacy on social integration among children with disabilities has a significant influence on practice and policies for the education and support of this population. Understanding this aspect of their development can contribute to improving the conditions for their social inclusion and for a better quality of life. In addition, research can stimulate debates and interventions on inclusion and equality in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media literacy refers to all types of media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet, and other new digital communication technologies. It is important to emphasize that, although online media have a central place in informing citizens in many countries, in the Republic of North Macedonia, according to the analysis of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, most of the citizens still use traditional media (television and radio) as sources of information. Regardless of the different sources, media outlets, in general, are fertile ground for deviant media phenomena, and therefore urgent updating of media literacy and education is necessary. This is

especially important for children with disabilities and their social integration. Most of the international research shows that media literacy can have a positive effect on the social interaction and learning of children with disabilities, thereby enabling them to access information, develop communication skills, and participate in various aspects of the community. The research of Johnson et al. (2019) "The Impact of Media Literacy on Social Integration of Children with Disabilities" explains the impact media literacy has on social integration among children with disabilities. The results of this research show that there are positive relationships between media literacy and social integration, especially among children with autism and communication disabilities, while the "Media Literacy and Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: A Review of Current Research" study by Harris and Smith (2020) analyzes different approaches and methods to support these children through media literacy and makes conclusions about best practices and needs for future research. "Digital Media Literacy and Social Participation of Children with Disabilities" research by Kim et al. (2028) explores the link between digital media literacy and the social participation of children with disabilities. The results show that digital media literacy can have a significant positive effect on the social participation and interaction of these children. "Media Literacy and Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: Strategies for Teachers" study by Smith and Davidson (2021) provides an overview of strategies and approaches that teachers can use to support the social integration of children with disabilities through media literacy. This overview identifies best practices and suggests practical advice for implementation. "Exploring the Impact of Media Literacy Education on Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: A Longitudinal Study" is a paper by Kovacevic et al. (2020) that investigates the long-term effects of the media literacy education on the social integration of children with disabilities. Using a longitudinal methodology, the authors analyze changes in the social interaction and participation of children over time. A research by Brown and Jones (2019) "Digital Media Literacy and Social Skills Development in Children with Physical Disabilities" explores the relationship between digital media literacy and the development of social skills in children with physical disabilities. The results emphasize the importance of digital literacy in supporting the social interaction and communication of these children. "Parental Perspectives on Media Use and Social Integration of Children with Intellectual Disabilities" is a research by Garcia et al. (2017) that analyzes parents' perceptions of media use and their impact on the social integration of children with intellectual disabilities. By interviewing the parents, the authors explore various aspects of this topic. "The Role of Assistive Technology in Promoting Media Literacy for Children with Sensory Disabilities" is a research by Lee et al (2021) that is an overview of the role assistive technologies have in supporting media literacy for children with sensory disabilities. The authors analyze different types of assistive technologies and their potential for improving media literacy in these children. All these examples from literature additionally show the various approaches and aspects of research related to the impact media literacy has on the social integration of children with disabilities. In RN Macedonia, as well as in other countries, there are initiatives, programs, and research that focus on supporting these children through media literacy. It includes campaigns and training for teachers, educational resources, and adapted media content which makes it possible to undertake various activities aimed at improving the access and participation of children with disabilities in the media culture. In Macedonia, as in many other countries, there are several challenges and opportunities for improving the access and participation of children with disabilities in the media culture. One of the challenges is to ensure media resources and content that are adapted to the different needs and abilities of these children. It is also necessary to provide training and assistance for teachers and parents so that they can support children in developing media literacy and their participation in media activities. On the other hand, opportunities for cooperation between government institutions, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and media companies can be essential to create favorable conditions for inclusion of children with disabilities in the media culture. This cooperation can be an opportunity for creating programs and resources that are tailored to their needs and capabilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact media literacy has on the social integration of children with disabilities, that is, to gain insight into how media literacy can affect the ability of these children to integrate into the community, including the development of social skills and how can they be improved. The research used a survey questionnaire as a data collection method from 15 parents of children with disabilities and 15 teachers, investigating the perceptions and experiences of these parents and teachers. The survey contains questions that explore the frequency of media use, the impact of media literacy on social integration, participation in activities through media literacy, challenges, and resources for using media literacy, as well as recommendations for improved access to media literacy for children with disabilities. In particular, the research focuses on the following questions: How does access to different media platforms and content affect the social integration of children with disabilities? What are the most effective ways to develop media literacy among this population and how does this affect their social inclusion? Which factors have the greatest importance for the successful social integration of children with disabilities in the context of media literacy? The survey data was subjected to statistical analysis to implement qualitative and quantitative approaches and to ensure a full analysis of the impact media literacy has on social integration in children with disabilities. These practices and conclusions can serve as a basis for developing programs and interventions to support these children and their communities.

The research sets out several hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1:** Children with disabilities who have access to a variety of media and technologies for media literacy will have greater opportunities for social integration in various joint activities and interactions.
- Hypothesis 2:** The use of specially designed media content and applications for children with disabilities will have a positive effect on their social skills and involvement in different social contexts.
- Hypothesis 3:** Children with disabilities who have support and training in the use of media literacy will show greater self-confidence and ability to successfully interact in a social manner in different situations.
- Hypothesis 4:** Parents and teachers who have a positive attitude towards the use of media literacy as part of educational process of children with disabilities will be more likely to support them in their social integration and development. The answers to these set hypotheses provide information about the use and impact of media literacy in children with disabilities, as well as the attitudes and needs of teachers and parents.

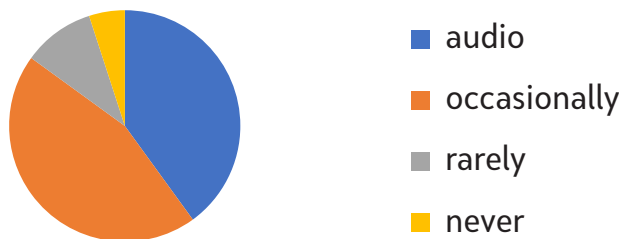
FINDINGS/RESULTS

Media literacy is something that is becoming an increasing necessity in society today, where technological advances are constantly changing the ways of communication and interaction. When it comes to children with disabilities, access to media content can be a key aspect of their social and cognitive development. At the same time, however, there are challenges and dangers associated with the use of media, especially when it comes to children

with disabilities. This research is important because it allows us to understand the impact of media literacy on the social integration of children with disabilities. By obtaining a detailed overview of this aspect of their development, we can tailor-made dedicated interventions and programs that will support them in their process of learning and growth. In addition, the research has the potential to contribute to the introduction of policies and strategies that will create a suitable environment for the development and inclusion of children with disabilities in society. In addition to identifying challenges, opportunities, and needs of this population, this research can also identify the interests of the wider community, including parents, and teachers (professionals). By understanding the importance of media literacy and its impactful potential, together we can create a better and dedicated environment for the development of children with disabilities. The research analyzed the results of survey questionnaires obtained from two target groups: parents and teachers of children with disabilities. Here are the answers to the questionnaire that surveyed the teachers of children with disabilities:

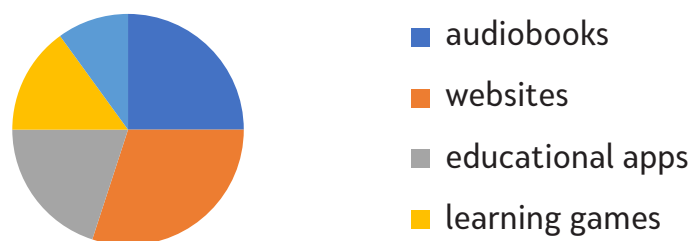
Question 1: How often do you use different types of media literacy in your teaching with children with disabilities? Answers: 40% of the teachers answered Regularly; 45% said Occasionally; 10% said Rarely; and 5% said Never.

Question 1:



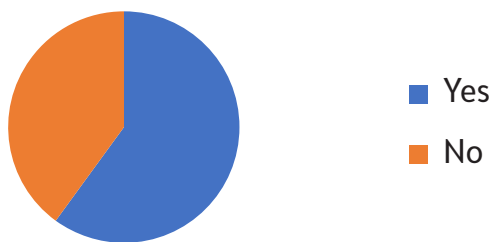
Question 2: What specific media resources or applications do you use to support the learning and social integration of children with disabilities? The most common answers are Audiobooks: 25%; Educational websites: 30%; Educational apps: 20%; Learning games: 15%; and Other: 10%.

Question 2:



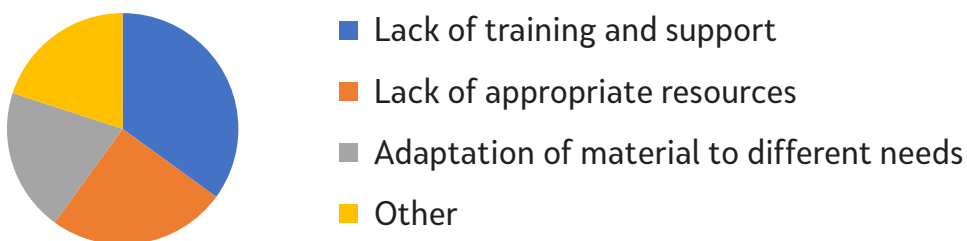
Question 3: Is your teaching material adapted to the needs of children with disabilities, including the aspect of media literacy? 60% of the teachers answered Yes, and 40% said No.

Question 3:



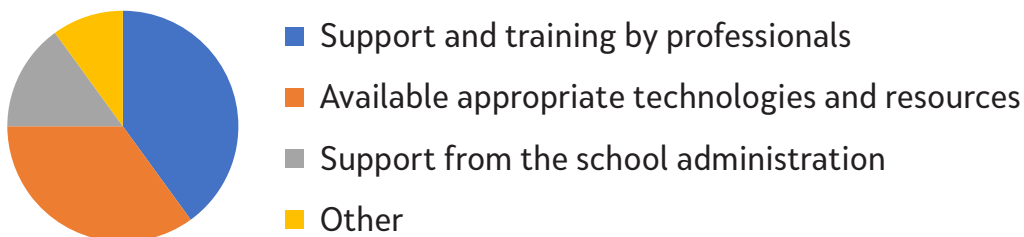
Question 4: What challenges do you face in including media literacy in the teaching process for children with disabilities? The most common answers are Lack of training and support: 35%; Lack of appropriate resources and technologies: 25%; Adaptation of material to different needs: 20%; and Other: 20%.

Question 4:



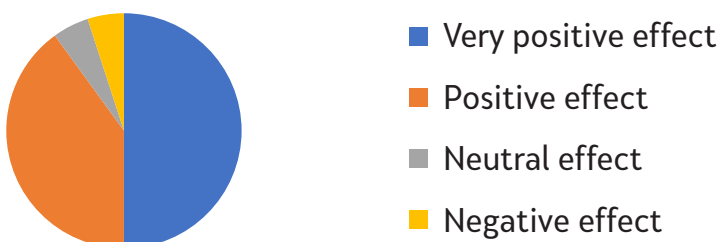
Question 5: What support and resources do you need to effectively integrate the aspect of media literacy in your teaching with children with disabilities? Answers: Support and training by professionals: 40%; Available appropriate technologies and resources: 35%; Support from the school administration: 15%; and Other: 10%.

Question 5



Question 6: To what extent do you think that the use of media literacy can have a positive effect on the social integration and learning of children with disabilities? 50% of the teachers answered that it has a Very positive effect; 40% that it has a Positive effect; 5% answered it has a Neutral effect; and 5% said it has a Negative effect.

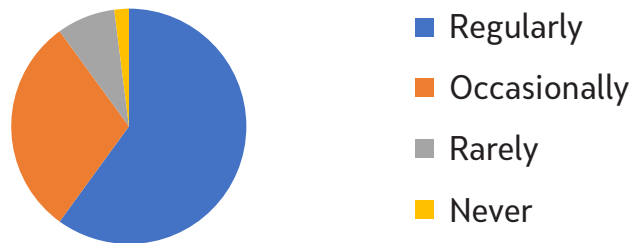
Question 6:



Here are the responses of parents of children with disabilities:

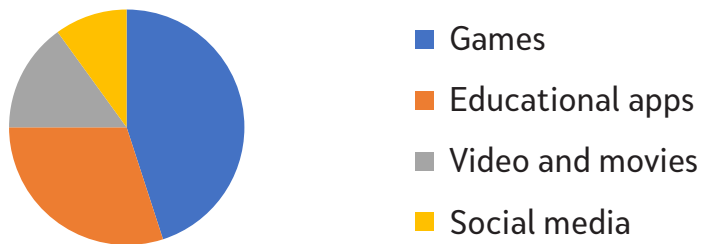
Question 1: How often does your child use the following media: computers, tablets, and smartphones? 60% of parents said Regularly; 30% of the parents said Occasionally; 8% said Rarely; and 2% said never.

Question 1:



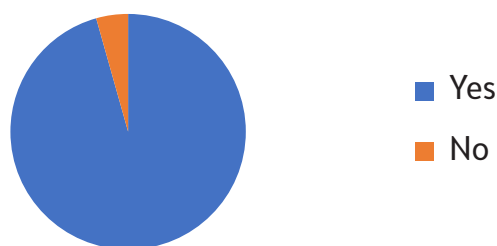
Question 2: What types of media does your child prefer? Answers: Games: 45%; Educational apps: 30%; Videos and movies: 15%; Social media: 10%.

Question 2:



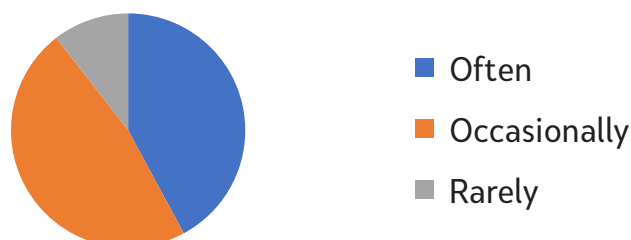
Question 3: Have you noticed an improvement in the social interaction of your child since he/she started using media? 70% of the parents answered with Yes, and 30% said No.

Question 3:



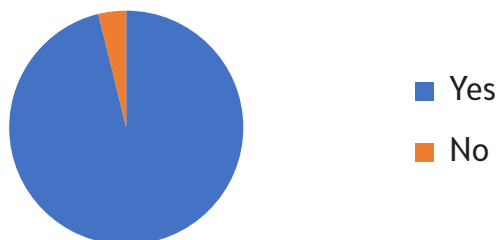
Question 4: How often does your child communicate with others through the media? Often: 45%; Occasionally: 45%; Rarely: 10%.

Question 4:



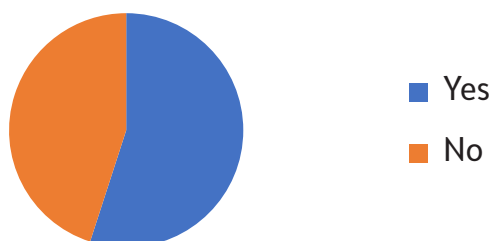
Question 5: Do you think media literacy has a positive impact on the learning and development of your child? 80% of parents answer with Yes; and 20% with No.

Question 5:



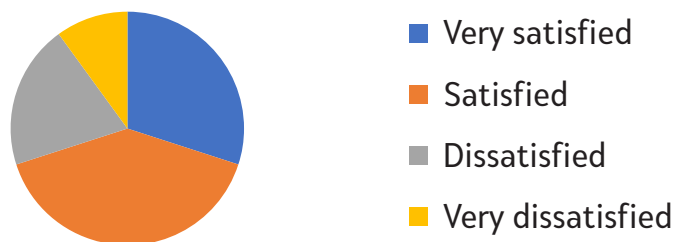
Question 6: Do you think that your child receives enough support and training in the use of media? Yes was the answer by 55%, and No was the answer by 45%.

Question 6:



Question 7: How satisfied are you with the way your child uses media in learning and development? Very satisfied: 30%; Satisfied: 40%; Dissatisfied: 20%; and Very dissatisfied: 10%.

Question 7:



These results provide information on the use and impact of media literacy in children with disabilities and also show the attitudes and needs of their teachers and parents.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Many studies indicate that the use of media, such as games, applications, and websites, can provide opportunities for children with disabilities to engage in a variety of activities and improve their social connections. The results of the research proved that media literacy has a positive effect on the social integration of children with disabilities. All hypotheses in the research were

confirmed. Children with disabilities who have access to a variety of media and technologies for media literacy have greater opportunities for social integration in joint activities and interactions. The use of specially designed media content and applications for children with disabilities has a positive effect on their social skills and involvement in different social contexts. Children with disabilities who have support and training in the use of media literacy demonstrate greater self-confidence and ability to successfully interact socially in a variety of situations. Parents and teachers who have a positive attitude towards the use of media literacy as part of the educational process of children with disabilities are more likely to support them in their social integration and development. It is pointed out that the results of this research have important implications for the educational system, as well as for parents and teachers who work with children with disabilities. The conclusion from the questionnaire intended for teachers of children with disabilities is that the use of media literacy is widespread, but not universal. Although a significant part of teachers use media literacy in their teaching, there is also a significant number of them who do not yet use this aspect in their practice. There is a need for training and support about the use of media literacy for children with disabilities, which is a challenge for the development of practice in education. There is a lack of resources and technologies and that is an obstacle for effective implementation of media literacy in the teaching process. Overall, the teachers express positive attitudes and perceptions about the impact of media literacy on the social integration and learning of children with disabilities, which confirms the importance of this aspect in education. These conclusions emphasize the importance of support and training for teachers, as well as the need for investment in resources and technologies for successful implementation of media literacy in the educational process for children with disabilities. Conclusion from the questionnaire intended for parents of children with disabilities is that the media literacy has positive impact on social interaction and learning. The parents express satisfaction with the way their children use media in learning and development, which indicates positive experiences and perceptions. These conclusions confirm the importance of parental support and the development of educational programs for promotion of media literacy in children with disabilities, which could lead to better social integration and successful learning. The research also confirms that children with disabilities who have access to and participate in various media activities have a higher probability of successful social integration. Support from parents and teachers, as well as access to specialized educational resources, is a key in the process of developing media literacy and social integration. There is a necessity for inclusive practices - the implications of the research recall the importance of inclusive practices in education and society as a whole, which includes access to media literacy for all children. The conclusion is that it is necessary to continue with research and with the development of programs and policies that support children with disabilities in acquiring media literacy and achieving social integration. With these conclusions, the research has significant potential to influence the practice and policies for support of children with disabilities to empower them for successful integration and participation in society.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The individual needs and challenges of children with disabilities should be taken into account. The analysis of results should take into account that the needs and challenges of children with disabilities can be different. Media literacy programs should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each child. Continued research and improvement of media literacy programs for children with disabilities is needed. Improved programs can lead to better social integration and the development of communication skills in these children. If research is conducted directly with children or persons with disabilities, researchers have a special responsibility to respect the rights

and interests of vulnerable groups at all stages of the research process. Individuals belonging to a vulnerable group are not always able to protect their rights and interests in the process of communication with researchers. They may also be reluctant to participate in research for fear of expressing their opinions or emotions in front of other people. On the other hand, researching their opinions, attitudes, experiences, and reactions to potentially harmful media content is of crucial importance for the development of programs and specific activities for their protection from such content and for the development of policies that lead to media content in which their rights and interests are respected. Because of all that, researchers who collect information about the media literacy of vulnerable groups are required to adopt a procedure of informing these groups and obtaining consent from them to participate in the research. They should also be particularly careful not to use classifications, descriptions, and terms that stereotype or stigmatize members of these groups. By implementing these conclusions and recommendations, we can create a basis for improving programs and practices related to media literacy in children with disabilities and support them in their development and integration into the community.

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Annex

ANNEX 1

Survey questionnaire for teachers

1. How often do you use different types of media literacy when you teach children with disabilities?
2. What specific media resources or applications do you use to support the learning and social integration of children with disabilities?
3. Is your teaching material adapted to the needs of children with disabilities, including the aspect of media literacy?
4. What challenges do you face in including media literacy in the teaching process for children with disabilities?
5. What support and resources do you need to effectively integrate media literacy into your teaching with children with disabilities?
6. To what extent do you think that the use of media literacy can have a positive effect on the social integration and learning of children with disabilities?

ANNEX 2

Survey questionnaire for parents

1. How often does your child use the following media: computers, tablets, smartphones?
2. What types of media does your child prefer?
3. Have you noticed an improvement in your child's social interaction since he/she started using media?
4. How often does your child interact with others through media?
5. Do you think media literacy has a positive impact on your child's learning and development?
6. Do you think your child is receiving enough support and training in using media?
7. How satisfied are you with the way your child uses media in learning and development?

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Marija Davchevska is a special educator and teacher-mentor who has participated in more than sixty seminars, congresses, symposiums, and conferences in the country and abroad in the field of special education, inclusive education, and supporting schools to create an inclusive learning environment. She is the author of more than 30 papers in domestic and foreign periodicals in the field of special and inclusive education. She has experience in implementing development projects in the field of inclusion, social inclusion, and discrimination, as well as organizing and preparing workshops, training, and events for teaching, professional and support staff, students, and professional services from primary and secondary schools in the field of inclusion and inclusion in society. , as well as experience in working with representatives of the civil sector. She is also the winner of the recognition „November 9“ of the city of Veles in 2022 for special engagement and contribution to the advancement of educational activity for students with disabilities.

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IN SLOVENIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA DURING QUARANTINE DUE TO COVID-19

Andrej Raspor^{8*}, Petra Kleindienst⁹, Zoran Mastilo¹⁰,
Andrijana Mrkaić Ateljević¹¹, Bojan Rojko¹², Predrag Ljubotina¹³

Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic had a catastrophic impact on the live music sector, putting the entire live entertainment industry into something nearing complete shutdown for more than two years. Purpose: The live music sector is still recovering from the impact of COVID-19. Even though most restrictions were lifted at the start of 2023, the industry is facing several challenges. These include rising costs and a saturated market after a long period of inactivity. There are also gaps in the workforce and some consumers are still hesitant to return to live events. Methods: To answer the research question “How did representatives of the music industry make a living during COVID-19”, we conducted two surveys: 1) A desk survey where we analyzed the measures taken by the national government. 2) An online survey where we collected data directly from representatives of the music industry. Results: In Slovenia, measures were taken to alleviate the fall in revenues. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were left to fend for themselves. Conclusions: Music events are an essential part of the local economy. They bring in tourists, create jobs, and generate income for local businesses. Live music events also provide a platform for musicians to showcase their talent and build a fan base.

Keywords: Slovenia; Bosnia and Herzegovina; COVID-19; limits music industry.

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Introduction

Music as emotional support is indispensable in people's daily life (Hu & Kim, 2022). Music is mainly divided into live music and recorded music. People will go to live music performances to experience seeing their favorite artists performing live and the atmosphere associated with a live performance. Live music can elicit positive emotions from the audience through visual and auditory stimulation. Enjoying music live with others also enhances the audience's musical experience in a way that recorded music cannot give (Swarbrick et al., 2019). In the last few years, our world has experienced huge disruptions because of COVID-19 we had to learn to live in a new reality. The performing arts have not been insulated from these tumultuous events, with the entire music industry being thrown into a state of instability due to the paralyzing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022). In the context of live music, the COVID-19 outbreak has been framed primarily as an economic crisis, in which the music-based products and practices through which revenue is derived have been abruptly and, arguably, irreparably disrupted by a global public health emergency (Taylor et al., 2020).

This study is mainly exploratory in the way we attempted to investigate the impact of a huge disruption in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic on a group of performing musicians and those who organize events and provide implementation support. In this study, we examined how representatives of the live music industry from Slovenia and Bosnia and Hercegovina's ability to cope with uncertainty, economic struggles, and work-life interplay during COVID-19 was influenced by various factors that affect a crucial part of the development and sustainment of music and music careers.

This study aimed to clarify how musicians coped during the pandemic and how their professional and personal lives were impacted across this period. The question that guided our research was: "How did music industry representatives make a living during COVID-19"?

To answer the research question, we conducted two surveys: 1) A desk survey where we analyzed the measures taken by the national government; 2) An online survey where we collected data directly from music industry representatives. In the following sections, we first present the theoretical background. This is followed by a presentation of the desk and online research. Finally, we conclude with recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact across the globe, with the music industry being significantly impacted (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022) and restrictions ordered by governments around the world have been an exogenous shock to the music industry (Denk et al., 2022). The pandemic has also affected the entertainment industry. Gaming is seeing unprecedented growth while the film and music industry is experiencing unprecedented challenges. Homebound consumers have shifted to online discovery and consumption of content. The companies that have been most successful during that time have been those with the capability to stream content directly to consumers, in their homes and/or on their mobile devices. They are for the most part companies with subscription-based business models (Guren et al., 2021). But empirical evidence shows that the COVID-19 outbreak signif-

icantly reduced music streaming consumption in many countries (Sim et al., 2022).

Much research has been carried out during the pandemic, mainly with the aim of proposing measures to help the music industry. The study (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022) examined how classical professional musicians coped with uncertainty, economic struggles, and work-life interplay during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that more internally motivated musicians are more resilient to pandemic threats and more capable of managing their practice.

A PLACE WHERE MUSIC IS PLAYED

Due to the restrictions, the way musicians perform has completely changed. Using Lefebvre's trialectics of spatiality (spatial practice, representations of space, representational space) as a theoretical lens for live music, the COVID-19 outbreak can be seen as a crisis of spatial materiality. During a time of lockdown and social distancing, spaces of music production (rehearsal spaces, studios) and consumption (venues, nightclubs) have found themselves suddenly unfit for purpose (Taylor et al., 2020). Musicians have moved from music halls to the Internet.

The live music industry is inherently spatial in nature (Taylor et al., 2020). The power of live music experiences, and by extension, the economic systems which capitalize upon these experiences, lie in music's "spatial and temporal qualities" (Jones, 1995). The performance of live music is produced and consumed within material spaces, "embedded in the visual and spatial dimensions of the physical stage" as a "bounded form" of interaction spatially and temporally (Holt, 2010). As such, we believe that researchers seeking to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on live music economies might usefully apply theories of space and spatial materiality.

We could take the sector's strengths in the period of COVID-19 to be these (Harper, 2020):

- Strong investment in technologies that allow for and support 'remote' delivery of CI products and services and often involve leading applications of such technological tools.
- A workforce that varies from the 'craft' worker, the sole creator, to large corporations but a great many of the workforce is capable of innovation, encouraged to do it, and regularly in pursuit of it, within their daily working lives.
- Integration with lifestyle choices that make the CI sector popular with consumers, whether as relief from situations where detachment from day-to-day life is welcome or simply as a way of connecting to a consumer's 'emotional life'.
- Being a notable hub of change where communication of cultural, social, and political values, ideals, and aspirations relies on the CI sector and, as such, CI producers and consumers tend to evolve alongside social and economic evolutions. This is not to say those of us involved in CI are any more aware or capable of embracing or even articulating evolving cultural, social, and political values, ideals, and aspirations. Simply, the CI sector is a primary hub for communicating and representing these changes.

COVID-19-induced restrictions adopted by governments around the world have been an exogenous shock to the music industry, which we divide into two affected groups (Denk et al., 2022): 1) live music events and 2) recorded music. While the impact on live music events is rather obvious, it is unclear how the past pandemic is affecting the recorded music market.

PROFESSIONS IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Before 2020, while the music industries were gaining strength, in many places they were also characterized as a sector ‘that runs to a large degree on luck, timing, and public sentiment, and where many of the places where security could be previously maintained are eroding’ (Strong & Cannizzo, 2020). Countries were not aware of its potential. By itself, it may not generate much revenue. But there are big multiplier effects. They also showed this attitude towards professions. Creative and artistic work does not typically fit neatly into discrete or simple categories or job descriptions (Flore et al., 2023). The varied and layered complexity of participants’ (precarious) work also extended to the collaborative dimensions of their work. Creative arts work consists of communal practices involving tangibly collective work and feelings of a shared identity or imagined community. Work in the creative arts industries is an entangled practice – it is not limited to a fixed, easily classified job – rather, it is best understood as a layered network of practices. It encompasses many roles (Ljubotina & Raspor, 2023) with imbricated skills (as demonstrated by the varied ways in Figure 1).

Musicians, both professional and amateur music creators, faced economic, social, and psychological hardship during the pandemic (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2022).

In the context of our research, we are mainly interested in those who receive income from live music. The live music sector is part of the larger music industry that organizes, and hosts live events such as concerts, tours, and festivals. It also manages venues, sells tickets, and helps artists earn money from their live performances.

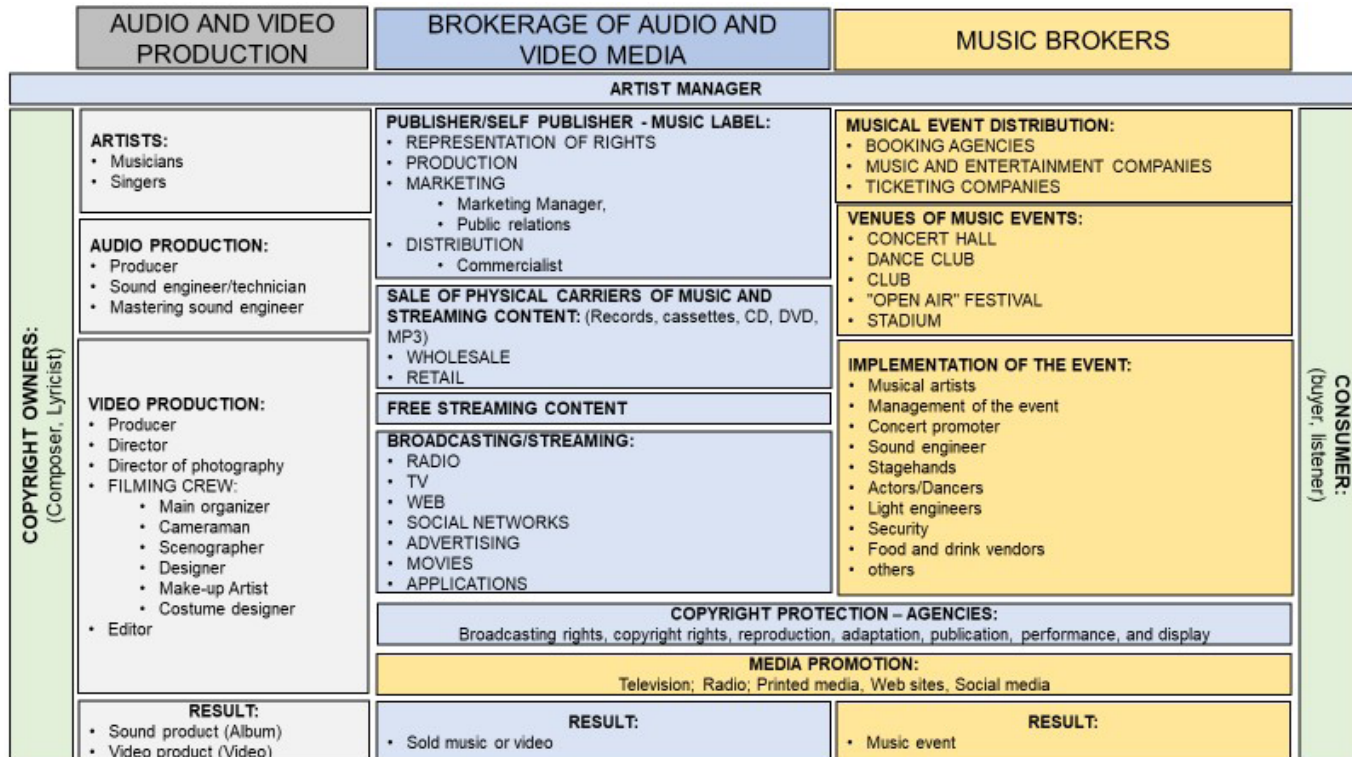


Figure 1. Music Industry Stakeholders (Ljubotina & Raspor, 2023)

The live music industry has several key players, including concert and tour promoters, booking agents, ticket agents, venues, and production crew. Promoters are responsible for organizing live events and taking on the show’s financial risk. They guarantee the artist a fee, book the venue,

hire the tech crew, sell tickets, and publicize the show. The promoter usually takes the financial hit if not enough tickets are sold. Booking agents act as intermediaries between artists and promoters. They look for opportunities for artists to play live and negotiate deals for each show. In addition, they have contacts with key venues and promoters and bring expertise in tour planning, visas, and brand partnerships.

Ticket agents sell tickets through their website and app. They also play an essential marketing role by helping artists and promoters target their marketing toward consumers in a specific region who are fans of certain genres of music. Ticket agents can also help with cash flow by advancing money to promoters. In addition to primary ticket agents who work directly with promoters, there is also a secondary ticketing sector. This includes brokers and touts who buy tickets from primary agents and resell them at a markup through ticket-resale websites. This sector is controversial within the music community. Venues play an important role in the live music sector. An artist's live career usually involves working up the 'live music ladder' by playing at venues with increasing capacities.

Production crew members work on the logistics and production of the show, including lights and sound. The number of people working on production varies depending on the scale of the show. The artist and promoter need to agree on who takes responsibility for what in terms of production and logistics. Ticket income is the most obvious and often the most important revenue stream for artists in the live music industry. Artists may be paid a split of the ticket income, or a set fee based on how much ticket revenue the show is expected to make. Artists can also earn money at shows by selling merchandise and receiving performance royalties through the collective licensing system if they perform their own songs. The live music industry is top-heavy due to economies of scale. As artists play at larger venues, they can earn more money from ticket sales. While production costs may increase as the show gets more significant, they do not advance to the same extent as ticket income, resulting in higher profit margins. For small shows, it can be challenging to profit from ticket sales alone, making merchandise sales and performance royalties important for artists.

Promoters and venues also have other sources of revenue beyond ticket sales. For example, they can earn money by selling food, drinks, and other services to the audience once they are inside the venue. Some brands also invest in the live music industry by purchasing access to tickets or ticket discounts for their customers or by getting their names and logos onto venues, stages, festivals, and tour posters.

OVERVIEW OF COVID-19 MEASURES

We are interested in how the countries approached solving the problems that arose in the music industry as part of the art industry. Cultural policy refers to the government's activities related to the arts, humanities, and heritage (Schuster, 2003). It involves strategies and activities that promote the arts' production, dissemination, marketing, and consumption (Rentschler, 2002). The development and organization of cultural policy are complex because they involve balancing competing visions of the role of culture in society based on political, social, and ethical values (Matarasso & Landry, 1999).

In the following paragraphs, we compare how the measures were approached in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. We chose these two countries because they were the subject of consideration in a literary project supported by two national agencies. We applied the methodolo-

gy used in the article Betzler et al. (2021), as a comparison methodology. Comparative assessments based on indicators that are simple, condensed and standardized became common in the 1990s when international policymakers (including the OECD and the EU) started to emphasize evidence-based and lesson-drawing governance as well as practices of monitoring (Peeters et al., 2014). The data collected include measures from various governmental departments that could affect cultural and creative organizations and workers, including the economy and business departments and those of social affairs, education, and culture. The data collected include measures from various governmental departments that could affect the music industry (organizations and workers). The measures included in this study were valid between mid-March and the cancellation of the COVID-19 epidemic in the countries included in our research.

Despite growing knowledge, the analysis of policy measures in response to COVID-19 is still limited (Betzler et al., 2021) Didier distinguishes two broad types of COVID-19 responsive policies in relation to firms (Didier et al., 2021) (Raspor et al., 2022): policies related to adapting the institutional framework and policies linked to providing credit to firms. Cross-country analysis allows us to see prominent attention to households and self-employed individuals. Therefore, the economic/social measures issued by the countries under scope can be divided into three categories: tax measures, employment-related measures, and stimulus measures. We also compared these parameters ourselves (Table 1).

1) Governments use tax measures as a control tool over financial resources in both macroeconomic and industrial policies. These measures have been issued to ease financial and administrative difficulties for companies and self-employed individuals. Governments have decided to defer payments such as taxes and social security contributions to improve the liquidity positions of companies and individuals. Some governments have also decided to defer the servicing of loans or the payment of utility bills.

2) The most extensive and diverse employment-related measures target self-employed individuals, companies, and their employees. They include compensation schemes and direct subsidies. All countries under consideration have launched some form of support for employers in the form of a wage allowance, where the government covers full or partial wage costs. This is intended to keep unemployment rates largely unaffected, prevent future unemployment, and avoid administration costs.

Table 1. Categories of COVID-19 measures in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Category of the measure	Type of measure	Slovenia	Bosnia and Herzegovina
1) Tax measures	Payment deferrals	X	X
	Rate reductions	X	X
2) Employment-related measures	Support for employers	X	
	Support for self-employed	X	
	Support for parents		
	Compensation of wage costs/short-time work compensation	X	X
	Regulatory changes related to conditions of unemployment support	X	
3) Stimulus measures	Loans	X	X
	Compensations		
	Guarantees		
	Export support		
4) Measures for the Cultural and Creative Industries	Subsidies and direct funding	X	X
	Loans and credits	X	
	Default compensation		
	Laws and regulations regarding COVID-19 measures for arts and culture	X	X
5) Measures for the Music Industries	Support for remote performances		
	Compensation for loss of income		
	Psychological counselling		
	Execution of events under limited conditions	X	X

(authors own work)

3) The next category of measures includes stimulus measures such as loans, compensations, guarantee schemes, tax rebates, etc. These measures aim to boost spending, increasing demand for goods and services, and leading to positive spillover effects on employment rates. This leads to more people having an opportunity to spend their income in the national economy, preventing national economies from collapsing. Stimulus measures mainly target employers similar to deferrals but require action employing a written application, unlike deferrals which are automatically confined to employers. Countries have different loan schemes for companies with low-interest rates or interest-free loans to ensure business viability. In addition, companies in specific sectors most affected by the crisis can apply for one-time compensation aimed at specific costs such as rent. They must meet certain criteria to qualify for compensation. Public credit guarantee programs have also been adopted by governments during the pandemic which allow companies to borrow more money than they would be able to do so based on collateral.

4) Some countries set up measures specifically for the cultural and creative sectors and

5) Music Industries. On 29 June 2021, the Commission published EU guidelines to facilitate

the safe resumption of activities in the cultural and creative sectors across the EU. The guidelines aimed to provide a coordinated approach in line with the specific national, regional, and local conditions. They were expected to guide the design and implementation of measures and protocols in EU countries and covered two key dimensions: the safe reopening of the cultural sectors and their sustainable recovery. The guidelines were presented in the context of a gradual improvement in the public health situation in the EU and considered the different epidemiological situations in the Member States. They provided the indicators and criteria to be taken into account when planning the resumption of certain activities (European Commission, 2023).

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

For this research, we analyzed historical data. In this paper, we have followed the following methodology. It includes three steps as shown (Figure 2):

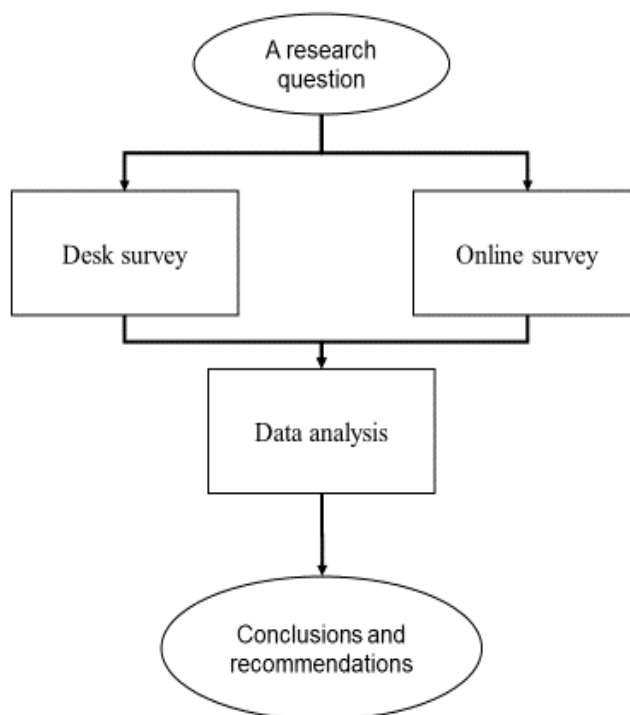


Figure 2. Research methodology
(authors own work)

To answer the research question, we applied two methodological approaches:

1) Desk research where we analysed the measures taken by the national government. The data on the examined countries was collected from the Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina national statistical offices. We also examined the theory and research findings in other fields.

2) An online survey where we collected data directly from music industry representatives. The survey was conducted between December 15, 2022, and May 15, 2023. In Slovenia, we received a total of 207 responses. The response in Bosnia and Herzegovina was slightly lower as we received only 56 responses. Finally, we conclude with recommendations.

The main research question is: “How did representatives of the music industry make a living during COVID-19?”

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Gender

A total of 163 men and 108 women responded to our survey (Figure 3). The share of these between Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is balanced. However, the number of those from Bosnia and Herzegovina is significantly lower.

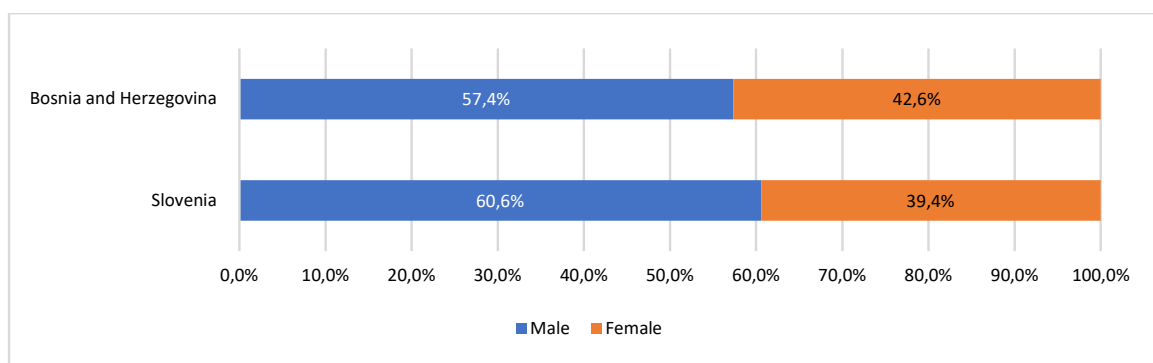


Figure 3. Gender (authors own work)

RESEARCH RESULTS

Role

First, we were interested in what kind of music respondents played (Table 2 and Figure 4). The largest share is those who are musicians. In addition, managers, organizers of musical events, support services and others also responded. In the case of musical events, it is a large interweaving of different activities in which different groups of professions are involved. We presented these professions in Table 2.

Table 2. Role

Role	Country where you currently live		Total
	Slovenia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	
Musicians (instrumentalists and vocalists)	140	34	174
Managers	5	10	15
Musical event organizers	12	3	15
Producers	5	1	6
Support (Sound Master/Technician; Stagehands; Actors/Dancers; Lightmen)	15	6	21
Public relations/marketing	5	0	5
Other roles or multiple roles related to music	25	2	27
Total	207	56	263

(authors own work)

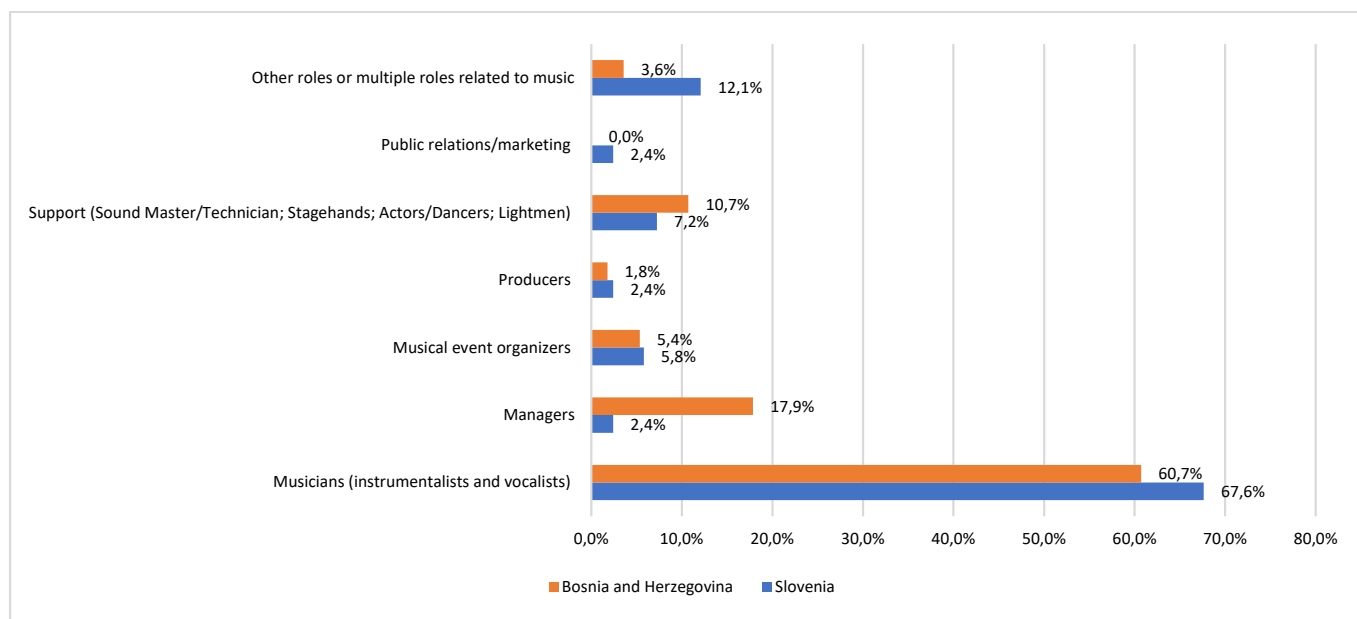


Figure 4. Role
(authors own work)

The genre of music

The question about the genre of music was included in the survey (Table 3 and Figure 5). Most of the respondents come from the field of popular music. The second largest group of bands are from classical music.

Table 3. Music genre

	Country where you currently live		Total
	Slovenia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	
Folk music	3	11	14
Classical, artistic, serious music	74	18	92
Jazz	11	4	15
Popular music (Pop, Rock, Hip hop, Techno, Rap, Reggae, Country, Rock'n'roll, ...)	94	19	113
Folk entertainment music	14	7	21
Dance music	2	0	2
Total	198	59	257

(authors own work)

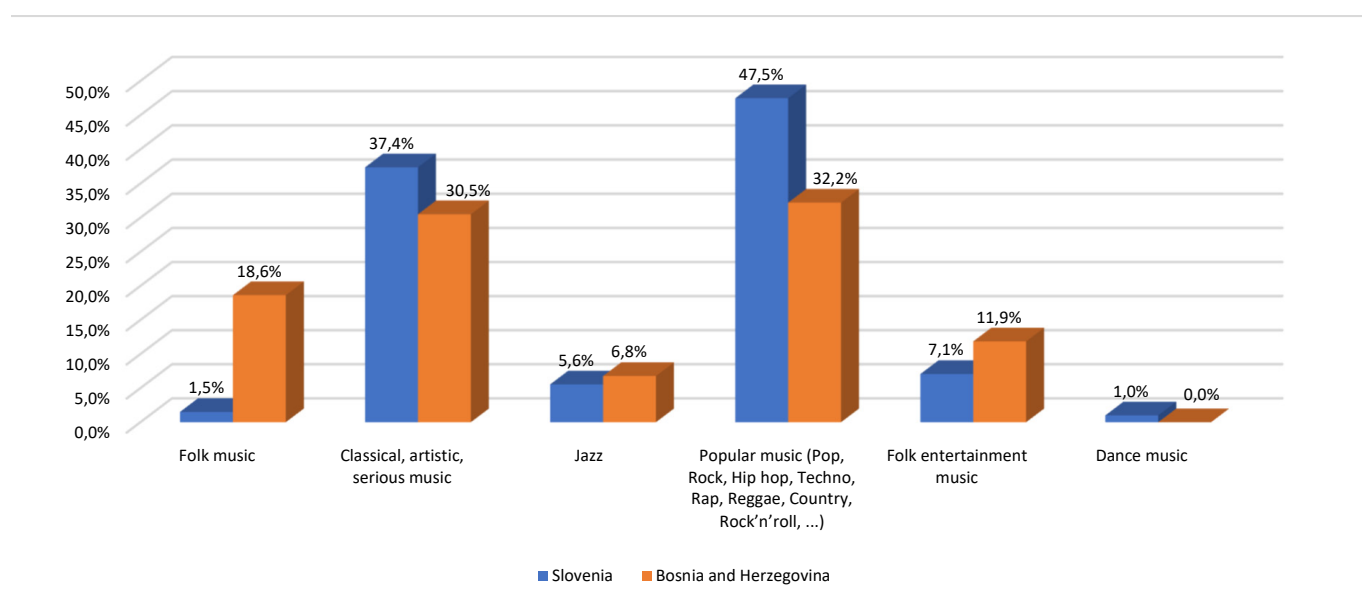


Figure 5. Music genre (authors own work)

Keep in touch with your audience during COVID-19

In the next set of questions, we were interested in how respondents stayed in touch with listeners during COVID-19 (Table 4 and Figure 6). Most of them still wanted to be in touch and had live performances despite the restrictions: 1) live performances with restrictions (masks, distance) and others that had live streaming, and 2) private performances (closed group).

Table 4. Keep in touch with your audience during COVID-19

	Country where you currently live		Total	
	Slovenia	Bosnia and Herzegovina		
Live streaming	60	25	85	
Online	84	29	113	
Instagram	54	16	70	
Facebook	82	23	105	
TikTok	8	1	9	
YouTube	72	16	88	
Live performance with restrictions (masks, distance)	98	24	122	
Private performance (closed group)	50	12	62	
Other:	13	3	16	
Total	521	149	670	

(authors own work)

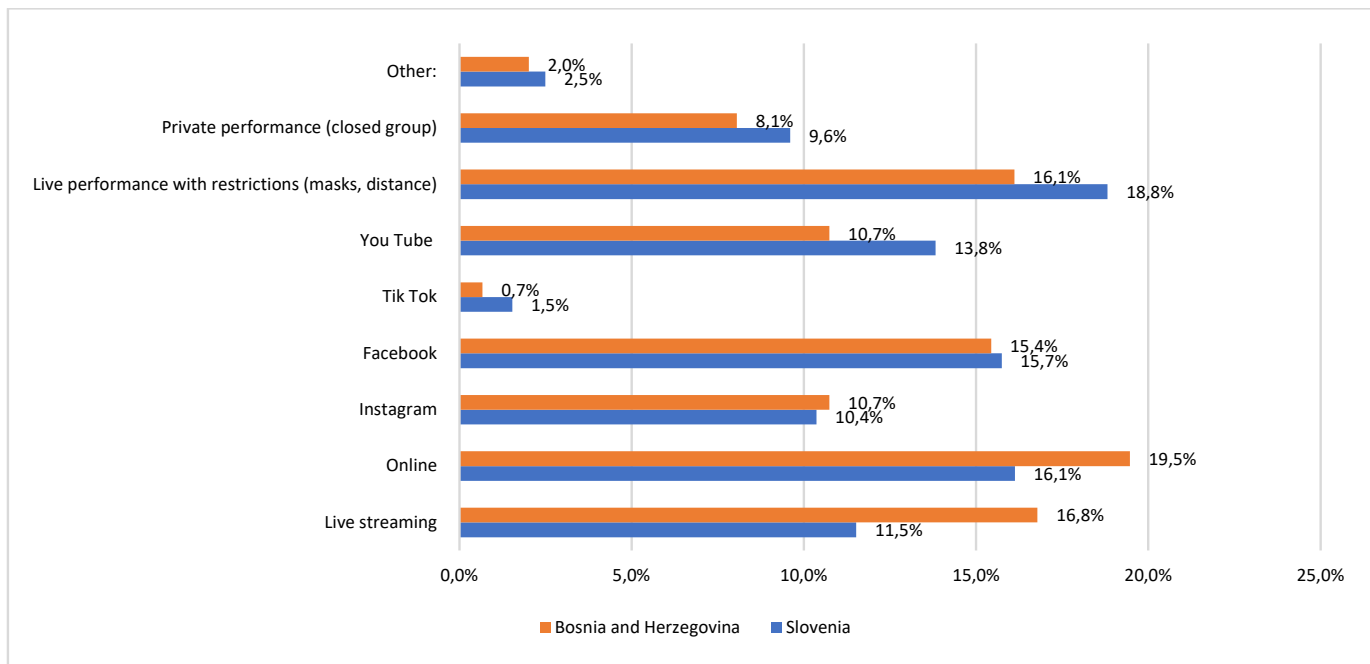


Figure 6. Keep in touch with your audience during COVID-19
(authors own work)

Technology has had a significant impact on the music industry. While some artists have expressed concerns about the effect of streaming services on their profits, technology has also brought many benefits. For example, artists can now publish their music online and market themselves directly to their audience without relying on traditional advertising channels such as radio or television. Technology has also created new monetization opportunities for artists and venues. Live events can use technology to enhance the performance and make it more engaging for the audience. Performances can also be streamed online to reach a global audience. Technology

can also improve the economic impact of music events by facilitating more efficient ticket sales, improving customer service, and creating more engaging experiences for attendees.

Received state assistance

The last survey question was about whether respondents received state support (Figure 7). There were 30 percent in Slovenia, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, no one received state support.

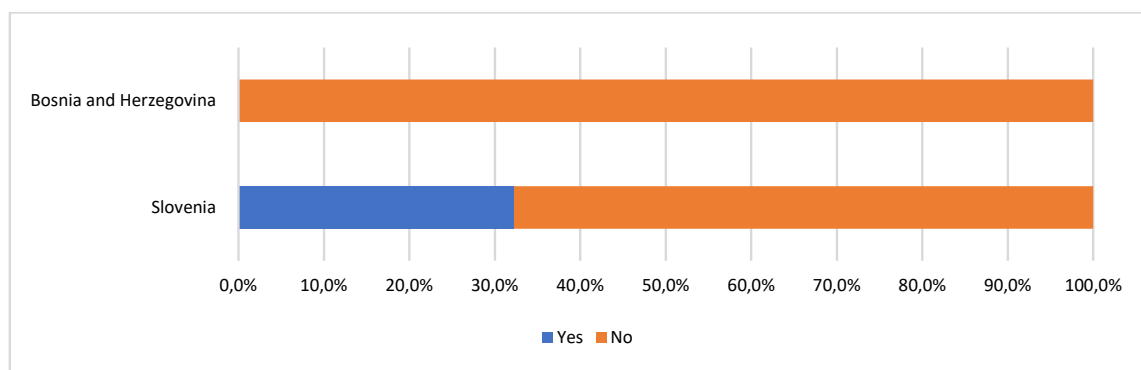


Figure 7. State support
(authors own work)

Considering the fact that no respondent received state aid in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the next step we analysed the Slovenian sample with the aim of detecting possible differences between individuals who received aid and those who did not. The findings of the analysis could in the future represent the starting point for future research in BiH as well. With this goal in mind, we set the following hypotheses for the Slovenian population:

- H1:** Received state aid affects the perceived level of negative impact of COVID-19 on living conditions.
- H2:** Received state aid affects the perceived level of general state support for music activities.
- H3:** Received state aid is correlated with an individual's thinking about career change.

For both populations of music industry stakeholders, we collected data on the rate of revenue decline as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, in this work, we tested the difference between the populations.

- H4:** The rate of decline in income of Slovenian musicians differs from the decline in income of musicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Hypotheses H1 and H2 were tested using the T-test, while hypotheses H3 and H4 were tested using the Chi square test. A different approach is necessary due to the nature of the variables themselves, which in the case of hypotheses H3 and H4 are categorical.

Table 5 shows the results of the comparison of independent samples on the Slovenian population. We found that the aid received from the state statistically significantly increases the level of perception of the negative consequences of the COVID -19 crisis. Thus, we confirmed hypothesis H1 for the Slovenian population. The comparison between the groups did not show a statistically significant difference in the perception of the level of general state support for the music industry. Thus, we rejected the hypothesis H2.

Table 5. T-test results

Did you receive a state aid?		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	t	p
Perceived negative impact of COVID -19	Yes	40	12.550	3.714	0.587	2.720	0.008
	No	88	10.557	4.119	0.439		
Perceived state support	Yes	51	14.510	4.615	0.646	0.620	0.536
	No	110	13.964	5.450	0.520		

(authors own work)

We were also interested in whether the received state aid in the Slovenian population of stakeholders in the music industry is related to thinking about changing careers during the crisis. The results of the test are shown in Table 6. The characteristic level of the Chi square test is $p=0.453$. On this basis, we rejected hypothesis H3 in the Slovenian population since we did not detect a connection between the received state aid and the possibility of changing the career path.

Table 6. Received state aid and career change option

Thinking about career change			Yes	No	Total	
Received state aid	Perceived state support	Yes	Count	25,0	34,0	59,0
		Expected		22,7	36,3	59,0
	No	Count	45,0	78,0	123,0	
		Expected	47,3	75,7	123,0	
Total	Count	70,0	112,0	182,0		
		70,0	112,0	182,0		
p = 0,453						

(authors own work)

Finally, we compared the population of musicians from Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina based on the rate of decline in income during the COVID-19 crisis. The results of the comparison are shown in Table 7, from which it can be seen that with a high level of statistical characteristics ($p<0.001$) we confirmed a different decline in income between the groups and thus confirmed hypothesis H4. The post-hoc test showed that a statistically significant difference occurs between those who perceived the smallest decrease in income (0%-19%) and those who perceived the largest decrease (80%-100%). In the middle of the two observed classes of income decline, the two populations do not differ.

Table 7. Decline in income

			0 to 19%	20 to 49%	50 to 79%	80 to 100%	Total
State	SLO	Count	26,0	14,0	13,0	25,0	78,0
		% within state	33,3 %	17,9 %	16,7 %	32,1 %	100,0 %
		Adjusted Res.	4,7	1,0	-0,6	-4,0	
		p value	0.000	0.320	-0.550	0.000	
	BiH	Count	0,0	6,0	11,0	36,0	53,0
		% within state	0,0 %	11,3 %	20,8 %	67,9 %	100,0 %
		Adjusted Res.	-4,7	-1,0	0,6	4,0	
		p value	0.000	-0.320	0.550	0.000	
Вкупно		Count	26,0	20,0	24,0	61,0	131,0
			19,8 %	15,3 %	18,3 %	46,6 %	100,0 %
Chi square p value <0,001; 0 cells (0,0%) have an expected count less than 5. The min. expected count is 8,09.							

(authors own work)

DISCUSSION

Since the end of COVID-19, everyone has looked toward embracing both the world as we knew it before it, and the world after the pandemic (Harper, 2020). We will most likely see the creative industries sector revisiting its shared strengths (that is, those shared across its sub-sectors). In doing so, we may well find that the CI sector's shared values and values around emotional life, innovation, technological tools, and evolutionary change are not only sectoral values but decidedly and unreservedly declarations of what it is to be human.

This paper examines the complex role of the music industry during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Repeated lockdowns, social distancing, disease control restrictions, and other guidance since March 2020 introduced a series of paradoxes and challenges in the arts and cultural sector. On the one hand, venue closures and job losses significantly disrupted the music industry. On the other hand, however, the pandemic also provided new opportunities for home-based arts engagement, including digital music activities, online music, and streamed performances. As the pandemic lengthened from late 2020 to 2021 and 2022, hybrid models of engagement and socially distanced engagement emerged. Since July 2021, the reopening of society has provided more freedom for the cultural industries.

Individuals' capacity to effectively handle the impact of COVID-19 on themselves was possibly dependent upon their existing identity resilience besides their physical assets (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2022). Answering the research question "How did representatives of the music industry make a living during COVID-19?": In Slovenia, they were lucky enough to receive support. Unfor-

tunately, this was not the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Everyone had to find their own way and survive this period. In Slovenia (Table. 5), where musicians received support, we found that the aid received from the state statistically significantly increased the level of perception of the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. However we did not detect a connection between the received state aid and the possibility of changing the career path.

Music events play a vital role in the local economy by attracting tourists, creating jobs, and generating income for local businesses. These events provide a platform for musicians to showcase their talent and build a fan base. They also stimulate the economy for businesses such as bars, restaurants, nightlife, and accommodation facilities. Music events unite people and create a sense of unity and belonging among attendees. They provide an outlet for creativity and expression and help build relationships between local businesses and the community. The cultural impact of music events is also significant. They can inspire future generations to pursue their passion for music and the arts. The importance of this cultural impact cannot be overstated. In conclusion, the benefits of music events to the local economy far outweigh any potential negatives. They bring joy to millions of people across the globe and have a positive impact on the local community.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the pandemic has shed light on an already precarious industry with ‘low waged precarity at its base’ (Banks & O’Connor, 2021), participants in our study stressed that they are skilled at navigating a certain degree of uncertainty, which they view as expected and, at times, necessary. Many thrived on holding several contracts, living with time pressure and tight deadlines. These enmeshed practices – that overwhelmingly rely on the circulation of networks and relations – were suddenly removed, or intensified, during the pandemic (Flore et al., 2023).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The article has certain acknowledgeable limitations and offers some directions for future research. However, this study presents certain limitations, and we must be cautious with our observations. For instance, we included a heterogeneous sample of musicians with diverse occupational backgrounds and roles who faced different challenges during the pandemic. Thus, this study provides a direction for future research to explore our results in more detail.

For instance, qualitative studies dealing with data generated from interviews or open-ended questions tackling professional performance practice might enrich these results with more nuanced explanations.

PRACTICAL AND/OR SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS (IF APPLICABLE)

In terms of policy implications, we would also advocate that organizations and government agencies should provide psychological support for musicians when concerts are canceled due to lockdowns and that these means of support should not only be adequate to provide essential needs (e.g., food and accommodation), but also in assessing musicians’ Self- Based/External-Based Motivation in the way they would be aware of its impact and its relation to (1) resilience and coping, and (2) the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022).

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE RESEARCH

The article's original value is creating the Music Industry Stakeholders model. This model may benefit future researchers. The current model, which was created (Gebesmair et al., 2000) in 1998 is not sufficient in this case. During this time, the music industry was significantly changed. With the advent of technology and new sales channels, as well as new content, it needs a new approach.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A.R., B.R., Z.M., V.M., and A.M.A. worked together to develop the study and collect data. P.L. analyzed the data with input from A.R. and A.M.A. A.M.A. drafted initial versions of the manuscript, which were proofread and edited by P.K. All authors collaborated to approve the final version of the manuscript.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This study involves human participants and follows the ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences. All participants received sufficient information about the research study. The data was obtained using the online tool 1ka, which ensures complete anonymization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank every musician who—despite the pandemic—took the time to participate in our study; their contribution to this research has been crucial in understanding part of the music industry in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles during the complex times. We also express our gratitude to all the societies, associations, institutions, and colleagues who kindly helped us by distributing the survey across the contexts of study. This article was compiled thanks to a bilateral project in the framework of scientific-technological cooperation between the Government of Bosnia and Hercegovina and the government of Slovenia that took place in 2021 and 2023.

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MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A FOCUSED STUDY

Edlira Palloshi Disha¹⁴

Abstract

North Macedonia's journey toward democratization and EU accession has faced significant political challenges, including constitutional changes. This study explores the media's role in shaping public discourse by examining the media framing of constitutional changes in North Macedonia. The analysis focuses on a brief period of ongoing debates, utilizing mixed methods of content analysis. The study focused on the coverage of North Macedonia's online media outlets from four major TV stations, analyzing a sample of 54 news pieces over 17 days. By categorizing the news pieces into neutral, negative, and positive contexts, this article aims to illustrate how these media outlets informed the public about constitutional changes on a significant political momentum that could define North Macedonia's EU path. The findings showed that the media's focus on the Macedonian opposition's rhetoric overshadowed other viewpoints, making them seem less important. This influenced the debate around constitutional changes and shaped how people thought about the issue. Moreover, the study finds that the public discourse was highly polarized and divided into pro and con constitutional changes incited by politics and media. The study highlights the importance of promoting constructive discussion and encouraging diverse viewpoints, ensuring all opinions receive equal media coverage as a paradigm of a healthy society that advocates for democratic values.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Constitutional Changes, EU Accession, Media frame, Democracy.

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UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia has faced various political challenges in recent years as it strives for democratization and EU accession. These challenges include sensitive national issues such as name change and constitutional reforms, which require extensive efforts from all segments of society, particularly political parties, and media.

North Macedonia faced obstacles in its journey towards EU accession, including a naming dispute with Greece and a following veto on accession talks. Bulgaria later blocked the start of accession negotiations due to concerns over historical and linguistic disputes. The constitutional changes in North Macedonia occurred within a specific historical context marked by political challenges and aspirations for democratization and EU accession. The country's journey towards constitutional reform was influenced by the long-standing dispute with neighboring Greece over using the name „Macedonia“. This dispute, which lasted from 1991 to 2019, resulted in a Greek veto against EU and NATO accession talks (Bechev & Marusic, 2020). The issue was finally resolved in 2019, leading to the joining of NATO and formal approval of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania by the EU in March 2020. However, another obstacle emerged when Bulgaria blocked the official start of North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations in November 2020 (Reuters, 2020). Bulgaria raised concerns regarding implementing the 2017 Friendship Treaty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017), state-supported hate speech, and minority claims towards Bulgaria. Overcoming these challenges required the involvement of various stakeholders, including the governments of North Macedonia and Bulgaria, as well as international mediators and EU officials. The constitutional changes were seen as a crucial step towards addressing these concerns and moving forward toward EU accession (EC, 2023).

However, in June 2022, Bulgaria lifted its veto, allowing negotiations to begin (Marusic, 2022). To progress further, North Macedonia must amend its constitution to include the local Bulgarian population and address opposition from Bulgaria. In the current situation, North Macedonia is facing the challenge of implementing constitutional changes that involve the inclusion of ethnic Bulgarians, along with other minority groups, in its constitution.

In April 2023 the government formed a working group with 10 representatives from the president's cabinet, the Secretariat for European Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and external legal and constitutional experts. This group proposed a set of changes that were submitted on May 2023 to the Government and presented to the Parliament. The suggested amendments included six additional ethnic communities—Bulgarian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Slovenian, Jewish, and Egyptian—in the Constitution's Preamble and two articles (Taylor, 2023).

As of the time this research was conducted in May - June, the situation in North Macedonia regarding the constitutional changes was characterized by opposition from multiple fronts. Macedonian opposition has disagreed with the proposed amendments, raising concerns about the potential impact on the country's identity and national unity. They argue that altering the constitution could undermine the Macedonian heritage and weaken the Macedonian character of the state (Marusic, 2023). On the other hand, the Albanian opposition sought to ensure adequate representation of the ethnic Albanian population. They demand that the '20 percent' be replaced with an Albanian language specifically representing ethnic Albanians in the constitution (Euronews, 2023).

This complex issue has generated political tensions and sparked debates about the balance between preserving national identity and fostering inclusivity within the country (A1on, 2023). The media discourse surrounding the constitutional changes in North Macedonia has been heavily concentrated within the Macedonian opposition, often overshadowing a healthy public debate that would thoroughly examine and clarify all aspects of the reforms (Trajanoski et. al, 2023). Additionally, the differing positions of the opposition and position highlight the complexities involved in achieving consensus on constitutional changes and the need for a delicate and inclusive approach to address the concerns of all actors.

The subject of this analysis is the media coverage of constitutional changes in North Macedonia. It examines how different media outlets report on this issue, the framing of perspectives for and against the changes, and the influence of this coverage on public discourse. The analysis also considers the implications of agenda-setting theory in shaping public opinion and political rhetoric surrounding the constitutional changes.

The unit of analysis in this study are news pieces from online media outlets of four major national TV stations in North Macedonia: TV Sitel, Kanal 5, Alsat M, and TV 21. Each news piece is examined for its content, framing, and perspective on the constitutional changes, as well as the space allocated to different viewpoints. The monitoring length was for 17 days to understand the frequency and narrative imposed on the public regarding the constitutional changes.

This examination aims to shed light on the relationship between media, public opinion, and democratic processes, contributing to a deeper understanding of the sensitive challenges North Macedonia faces.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the realm of democratic societies, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, influencing political discourse, and setting the agenda for public discussion. Through the selective presentation and framing of news, the media can shape what the public thinks about and focuses on (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Repeated media exposure to certain issues can elevate their importance in the public's mind and guide collective attention toward those issues. This, in turn, can affect public perceptions, policy discussions, and even voting behavior (Bishop, 1999). Agenda-setting theory posits that the media can determine the salience and prominence of particular issues or topics within the public sphere as McCombs (2004) notices. Understanding how media coverage impacts public perception is crucial, particularly in the context of significant political events or sensitive issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). The exploration of how the prioritization of certain issues shapes the broader political agenda and influences decision-making can be traced and analyzed (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). According to Rosler (2017), McCombs and Shaw determine the degree to which the media sways public opinion, by comparing the salience of issues in news content with the public's perceptions. Public opinion feeds off the media, which informs the public through an ongoing process of interaction, whereas this somehow informed public opinion, in turn, influences political decisions and policies, thereby impacting the country's progress (Fuga, 2017). Applying this theory to the case of constitutional changes in North Macedonia, we can investigate how the media shaped the agenda surrounding this issue by analyzing the news coverage from various media outlets. This involves examining the emphasis placed on perspectives both supporting and opposing the constitutional changes, the amount of space allocated to each viewpoint, and how certain viewpoints were marginalized or silenced.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study involved a content analysis of media coverage from four major North Macedonian online media outlets of national TV stations: TV Sitel, Kanal 5, Alsat M, and TV 21-MK. These online websites of TV stations were chosen for monitoring based on the report from the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services of North Macedonia, which highlighted viewer preferences from April to June 2023. According to the report, Sitel TV and Kanal 5 were the top-ranked Macedonian-language national TV channels, while Alsat M and TV 21 were the most viewed by Albanian citizens, with Alsat M being the leading national TV channel and TV 21 the top-ranked nationwide TV channel via satellite or cable (AVMU, 2023, p.58).

Over 17 days, from May 27, 2023, until June 12, 2023, the frequency and framing of news related to the constitutional changes were monitored. This included analyzing the number of news pieces focused on the issue and the prominence given to various perspectives. The study also incorporated qualitative analysis by examining how the media coverage aligned with agenda-setting principles, focusing on how the narrative of nationalist rhetoric influenced public discourse and potentially suppressed alternative viewpoints.

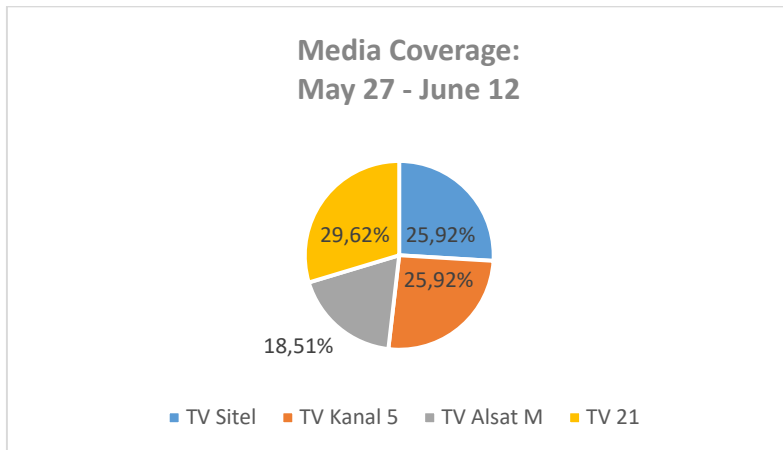
Simultaneously, through desk research existing opinion polls of North Macedonian citizens conducted after the monitoring period were analyzed to assess their perspectives on constitutional changes.

Through data collection, in total, 54 news pieces were analyzed by searching with the keywords 'constitutional changes' and '20 percent' in Macedonian and Albanian languages within the predetermined timeframe. For this analysis, three categories (negative, neutral, and positive) were used, to review how the media swayed the public discourse regarding the constitutional changes. It is important to note that assigning these categories to the news pieces—positive, negative, or neutral—does not imply that the media covered the story in a biased manner. Rather, it reflects the amount of attention to which media outlets provided space for various actors to express their perspectives on the issue of constitutional changes, whether it was negative, neutral, or positive about the constitutional changes. News pieces were assigned a negative context if they predominantly reflected a negative point of view on the constitutional changes, especially when such perspectives were mainly expressed by the Macedonian opposition. The neutral category was assigned to news pieces that merely informed about the process and procedures of the constitutional changes in the parliament and government at the national level. News pieces were assigned a positive context if they predominantly reflected a favorable view of the constitutional changes and the path to EU integration. This category included activities and statements from the government advocating for the changes, as well as statements from international figures such as the U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia, Angela P. Aggeler and former U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia Jess L. Baily.

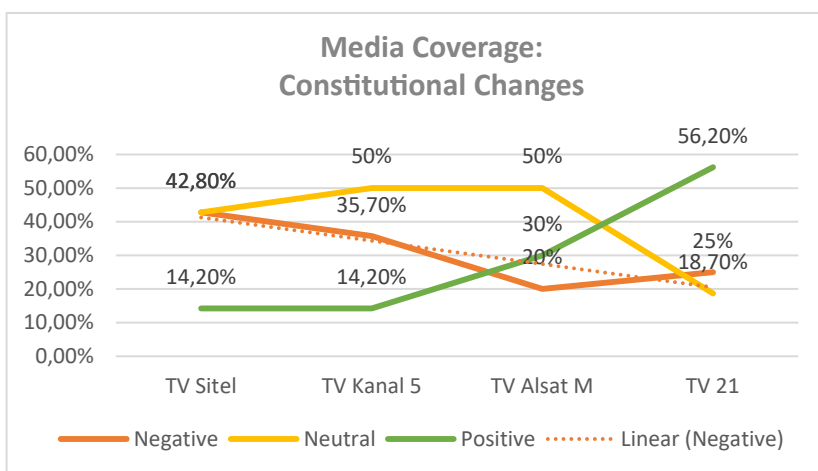
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The following section presents the findings from the analysis of media coverage regarding the proposed constitutional changes in North Macedonia. This analysis encompasses a total of 54 news pieces gathered from the online media platforms of four major TV stations, covering the period from May 27 to June 12, 2023. By categorizing the coverage into neutral, negative, and positive contexts, this article aims to illustrate how these media outlets shaped public discourse

around the constitutional amendments. In this context, it can be confirmed that the TV 21 on-line platform generated more news on the issue of constitutional changes during this period. The table below presents the number of news pieces in percent produced by each media outlet. The two media outlets from the Macedonian-language TV stations were aligned in this regard, producing the same number of articles (see Table 1).



From the quantitative analysis of the news pieces during this period, it is evident that media outlets from Albanian TV stations (TV Alsat M and TV 21) produced more positive news regarding the constitutional changes. Examples include: ,Former US Ambassador in Skopje: Constitutional changes are a solution for the EU‘ (TV 21, June 9, 2023), and ,Ageler: The constitutional changes should pass by the end of the year‘ (TV Alsat M, May 28, 2023). Both of these interviews appeared on each of the Albanian media outlets monitored in this research. However, these pieces were absent from the Macedonian-language media (TV Sitel and TV Kanal 5), where coverage predominantly featured statements and news from the opposition leader Kristijan Mickoski and his party VMRO-DPMNE, as well as on arguments between the Macedonian party in government (SDSM) and the Macedonian opposition. For instance, ,Mickoski: Without the two conditions delivered by VMRO-DPMNE, there will be no constitutional changes‘ (TV Kanal 5, June 8, 2023) and ,VMRO-DPMNE: We will not accept constitutional changes according to Bulgarian dictation‘ (June 12, 2023).

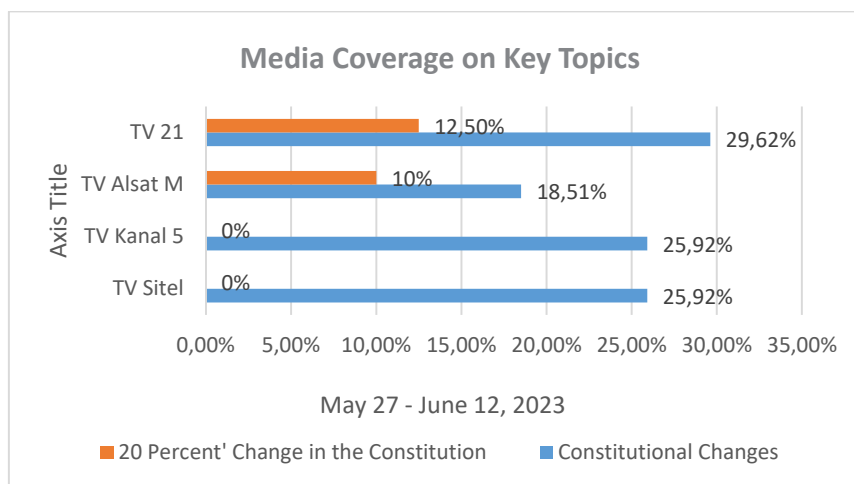


In the instance of producing news about constitutional changes, in higher percent (42.8 - TV Sitel and 35.7 – Kanal 5) these outlets produce negative viewpoints for constitutional changes in North Macedonia.

We can conclude that, during the given period, the online media of TV 21 station produced a high proportion of positive content about the constitutional changes (56.2 percent) and a low proportion of negative content (18.7 percent) (see Table 2).

However, this study does not cover the entire duration of the discussion on constitutional changes in North Macedonia. Therefore, more comprehensive research is needed to accurately determine the extent to which these media outlets provided space for various viewpoints and swayed public opinion on constitutional changes.

For this research, four media outlets were analyzed by searching their websites for two key topics: 'Constitutional Changes' and '20 percent,' in both Macedonian and Albanian languages. The results revealed that the Macedonian media provided no coverage of the '20 percent' requirement by the Albanian opposition. In contrast, the Albanian media addressed this issue, accounting for 10% of the total number of articles on constitutional changes during this period for TV Alsat and 12.5% for TV21 (see Table 3). In this case, we can confidently assert that the Macedonian media's effort to marginalize or silence the topic from different points of view can be attributed to agenda-setting theory. This theory emphasizes how the media's coverage prioritizes certain issues while diminishing the prominence of others, leading to a lack of attention to diverse perspectives by influencing and swaying public discourse on a specific topic.



However, four media outlets were subjected to content analysis, revealing a striking pattern: daily, two pieces from these outlets were found to specifically focus on the Macedonian opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and its arguments against the constitutional changes (See Appendix 1).

'The government doesn't seem to have any plan or talk about it. On the other hand, we have a prime minister who has been blackmailed. We have a prime minister who is being held hostage by a DUI, and they are the real bosses in the government, crime bosses and masters of other people's destinies', Mickoski added (TV Sitel, 09.06.2023).

This rhetoric of mutual blame has characterized the entire period of public discourse on constitutional changes, diverting the audience's focus from the main aspects and essential information regarding the changes. Simultaneously, it has incited divisions by encouraging the public to take sides, either in support of or against them. This polarization of public discourse has obstructed the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and well-informed decision-making.

The Macedonian opposition's strong opposition to the changes has garnered significant media attention, leading to a polarized narrative that predominantly focuses on their criticisms and concerns, inciting public hatred against Bulgaria: 'VMRO-DPMNE: We will not accept constitutional amendments according to Bulgarian dictation', (Kanal 5, 2023). The media's emphasis on the opposition's situation can contribute to a biased representation of the reforms, potentially limiting the public's understanding of the broader implications and potential benefits of the changes.

The agenda-setting theory introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) shifted the focus of media effects research from telling people what to think to influence what they think about. This perspective highlights the power of the media in shaping public discourse and setting the agenda for societal discussions. The media coverage for the Macedonian opposition aligns with agenda-setting theory as it strategically emphasizes nationalist rhetoric and amplifies their narrative for a sensitive issue that the country faces, such as Constitutional Changes for opening the path to EU accession. For example: 'Mickoski: Government without DUI, and the constitutional amendments should be effective when Macedonia becomes a member of the EU' (TV 21-Mk, 2023). With this statement, VMRO-DPMNE alludes that as the biggest Albanian political party in government, DUI, has no right to decide for the Macedonian national interest and North Macedonia's path. Their actions contribute to the incitement of divisions, fueling inter-ethnic hatred and exacerbating impatience among the population. By emphasizing the perceived threats to national identity and sovereignty posed by the constitutional changes, the opposition aimed to rally support and mobilize the population against the reforms. Exploiting nationalist sentiments can further polarize public opinion and fuel societal divisions. The media's strategic use of nationalist discourse serves to solidify their political standing and garner public sympathy, potentially overshadowing a more nuanced and constructive discussion.

From the quantitative analysis we saw that Macedonian language media provided more space for this narrative (see Table 1), whereas, through repeated coverage and selective reporting, the opposition media sets the agenda by focusing on nationalist rhetoric, stirring emotions, and framing the changes as threatening national identity. By doing so, they effectively set the agenda for public discussion, steering the attention and priorities of the audience toward their preferred narrative. This agenda-setting process influences the issues that receive the most attention, overshadowing alternative perspectives. The opinion poll conducted on December 2023, showed that only 24% of those surveyed participants agree to meet the commitment if it means continuing the integration process by changing the Constitution to include the Bulgarian minority group (Velinovska, 2023). In this analysis, only 14% of Macedonians and 49% of Albanian citizens believe that constitutional changes are necessary for North Macedonia's accession to the European Union. From a political party affiliation perspective, a significant percentage of respondents who identify with SDSM (61%) and DUI (62%) support the implementation of constitutional changes, compared to only 7% of respondents affiliated with VMRO-DPMNE. This substantial difference in perception aligns with the beliefs associated with their political party affiliations. These results indicate a highly polarized society with differing viewpoints, where public discourse is influenced by political parties and their respective media outlets. The study on public opinion conducted in December 2023 closely correlates with this focused study conducted in May-June 2023 on constitutional changes, illustrating the media's impact on public discourse by prioritizing topics and influencing how the public thinks about an issue.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to critically analyze the motives behind media narratives and promote a balanced and informed discourse that encourages a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Moreover, fostering an environment that encourages open and inclusive dialogue is essential, enabling different viewpoints on the issue and their implications for the country.

In conclusion, agenda-setting has played a significant role in shaping the media coverage of the constitutional changes in North Macedonia. The media, as a powerful force in shaping public opinion, has the ability to influence the salience and prominence of certain issues. In this case, the Macedonian opposition has strategically capitalized on nationalist sentiments to rally support and gain political leverage. Media outlets by amplifying their narrative and framing the constitutional changes as a threat to national identity, have set the agenda for public discourse, overshadowing alternative perspectives and limiting constructive discussion. This manipulation of media coverage aligns with the principles of agenda-setting theory. It is crucial to critically analyze media narratives, promote balanced and informed discourse, and encourage a comprehensive understanding of the constitutional changes to ensure an inclusive democratic society in North Macedonia. By doing so, a more diverse and informed public dialogue can be fostered, ultimately contributing to the democratic processes and societal progress in North Macedonia.

During constitutional changes, media coverage becomes even more significant as it can shape the narrative, mobilize support, and create an encouraging environment for a healthy public debate with a well-informed public. However, it is crucial to critically evaluate the media's role in sensitive national issues, ensuring that a diverse range of voices and perspectives are represented. By promoting balanced and informed media coverage, societies can foster a more inclusive and constructive dialogue, facilitating a deeper understanding and engagement with the complexities of constitutional changes. The media's responsibility to provide accurate, fair, and comprehensive coverage is vital to upholding democratic principles and facilitating the progress of societies towards democratization.

"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum - even encourage the more critical and dissident views". Naom Chomsky

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Firstly, the analysis covers a limited timeframe and does not capture the entire duration of the discussion on constitutional changes. As such, it may not fully represent the evolving media landscape and public opinion over a longer period. Therefore, longitudinal research needs to be considered to reflect the overall landscape of media and public discourse on the constitutional changes in North Macedonia. Additionally, this study focuses on a select number of media outlets, which may not encompass the full diversity of media perspectives in the country. Future research should extend the analysis to a broader range of media sources and a longer timeframe to gain a more comprehensive understanding of media influence. Incorporating additional methods of discursive analysis could pro-

vide deeper insights into the narrative and rhetoric surrounding the constitutional changes. Finally, conducting an opinion poll on constitutional changes and nationalist sentiments among the citizens of North Macedonia could offer a more holistic view of the media influence, political discourse, and its effects on decision-making and voting behavior.

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Appendix 1

List of Media Coverage for Constitutional Changes:

- Micevski for Channel 5: The Parliamentary Group of VMRO-DPMNE Will Not Vote for Constitutional Amendments,“ 2023. Retrieved from <https://kanal5.com.mk/micevski-za-kanal-5-pratenichkata-grupa-na-vmro-dpmne-nema-da-glasa-za-ustavni-izmeni/a586308>
- VMRO-DPMNE: We will not accept constitutional amendments according to Bulgarian dictation, 2023. Retrieved from <https://kanal5.com.mk/vmro-dpmne-ustavni-izmeni-po-bugarski-diktat-nema-da-prifatime/a586302>
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