Advocating for Truth in North Macedonia: Challenges and Imperatives in a Fragmented Information Landscape

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In today's world, when digital media is so prevalent in our everyday lives, it is more crucial than ever to understand how it affects our thoughts, choices, and interactions with others.

As digital platforms take over as the main information sources, they influence not only our beliefs but also how we see the truth. With a constant flow of information, viewpoints, and infomercials, it's easier to fall into echo chambers, where we are only exposed to concepts that support what we already believe. This makes it more difficult to discern fact from fiction and affects what we support, how we participate in public debate and our political preferences. In a world where information is accessible yet frequently unreliable, it is crucial to be vigilent in order to make decisions that are well-informed and represent an actual knowledge of the issues that matter most.

Promoting the truth becomes more challenging in a time of constant information overload. The challenge is even more critical in North Macedonia, where public discourse is

shaped by political polarization, media fragmentation, and malign influences. The distinction between fact and opinion is frequently confused in this context due to the rapid dissemination of false information and low levels of trust in institutions. In this situation, promoting the truth entails more than just stating the facts; it also entails actively interacting with a polarized and diverse audience, encouraging critical thinking, and returning confidence in the institutions that influence public opinion.

The first question we should ask is: **What does it truly take to advocate for the truth in North Macedonia?**

Given that North Macedonia is characterized by high levels of populist communication, low levels of trust in media and institutions, and a high level of social media use—with almost 56 percent of the total population aged 18 and above active on social media. —we can say that North Macedonia has all the preconditions to be vulnerable to disinformation as highlighted by the scholar Humprecht and collaborators. Moreover, North Macedonia's strategic orientation often struggles to find a path between the West and the East. Russian influence manifests through direct support from political figures, dissemination of pro-Russian narratives, and efforts to sway public opinion against Western alliances like NATO and the EU.

According to opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute, support for EU integration is lower among Macedonian citizens, and strong commitment is consistently shown by the Albanian population in North

Macedonia, followed also by Albania and Kosovo citizens. This also highlights the deep divisions and fragmentation within society, both ethnically and ideologically. The media is similarly divided along ethnic and political lines. This suggests that the social information space is a mirror of our divided society. However, this disruption is further deepened by nationalistic narratives spread on social media and intensified during the most decisive times in North Macedonia.

When speaking about foreign influence, North Macedonia is embedded and integrated into its population through political parties, influencers, and their media channels. Key narratives promoted by Russian sources included discrediting democratic institutions, undermining the Euro Atlantic values, and amplifying nationalistic narratives within North Macedonia's society.

In a yet-to-be-published study, I found that 78 fact-checked articles from May 2024 mostly contained disinformation about the conflict in Ukraine. Following this, the most common topics were anti-West and anti-EU sentiments, anti-government movements, opposition to the Prespa Agreement and its implications, etc. These are corrected articles by fact-checkers who anybody can read online, however, their viewership is low in comparison to the original articles disseminated with false information.

In this election cycle, we witnessed a high level of polarization with nationalistic narratives fueling fear and hatred among Macedonian citizens. Prominent narratives

included claims of "Albanization" of the state, assertions that Macedonians are becoming "second-class citizens" in "their own country," and allegations that constitutional changes are being imposed under a Bulgarian dictum.

Having this in mind, **If the information space is fragmented, where to advocate for the truth?**

Digital media offers a space to share and advocate for our beliefs. But how can you make an impact in society through data-driven research in a space overloaded with all kinds of information, where each of us is surrounded by our echo chambers that social media algorithms enable, where the receiver of the information can be also the agent of the information and vice versa?! In a study conducted in 2020 for my master's thesis, I was intrigued to see how politically affiliated individuals behave and are affected by disinformation. Researching the topic of confirmation bias, which means that people access and accept information that confirms their prior beliefs about a specific topic, made me very pessimistic about the potential for making an impact. The results of the study showed that politically affiliated individuals are more affected by political disinformation regarding their own and their opponent's political party. They believed their affiliated political party's disinformation, if it had a positive context, and believed the disinformation about their opponent's political party if it had a negative context.

Moreover, when it comes to elections, disinformation campaigns increase their activities to deliberately confuse

voters, reduce participation, and undermine trust in democratic values and institutions.

Sensationalism and clickbait culture have overtaken the public sphere, where providing space for constructive and objective ideas from different perspectives that would have helped opinion formation is no longer an effort. Now, Edward Bernay's "Engineering consent" is more applicable than ever, reducing cost, shortening time, and exerting rapid influence through the use of micro-targeting tools.

According to the International Election Observation Mission for this election cycle 659,077 EUR donations from individuals and legal entities. Out of this sum, 87 percent was accounted for by the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition.

According to the Meta Ad Library, during the period of 18 April-4 May, political parties spent a total of 100,951 EUR on advertising, with the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition spending 44,485 euros and the SDSM-led coalition spending 25,014 euros.

This data underscores the critical role of social media in shaping political discourse and influencing voter behavior in the country.

In these conditions, when voter preference is engineered unconsciously, there is doubt whether they will support the future democratic government or not. This depends on whom and for whom they have been influenced. With all these continuous efforts, how can we be sure, and how can

we say that citizens are ready to make rational choices in future elections? Well, I think this is obvious now.

Why is speaking and pursuing truth essential today?

By making this question, we immediately associate it with the concept of post-truth.

The post-truth era is characterized by blurring the facts and arguments and prioritizing emotions and feelings which replace objective truth by drawing subjective conclusions. Having said that, fragile societies are always the target of information manipulations through emotional incentives that happen either in the media, by politics, or by certain groups that aim to disorient and deepen the division of an already divided society.

In a focused study that was recently published, I researched 54 news pieces from four media outlets to examine how they reported on constitutional changes in North Macedonia during a specific period. This study included both Macedonian and Albanian language media. The results showed that Macedonian language media outlets, which were part of this research, reinforced the opposition's statements about the constitutional changes, by not offering different viewpoints and perspectives to the audience. This phenomenon aligns with the agenda-setting principle, wherein media coverage prioritizes certain issues while diminishing the prominence of others, leading to a lack of attention to diverse perspectives and influencing public discourse on a specific topic.

This rhetoric has characterized the entire period of public discourse on constitutional changes, diverting the audience's focus from the main aspects and essential information regarding these 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.

Moreover, if we speak about the lack of institutional and media trust, it's concerning to note that in a recent opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), citizens of North Macedonia show a higher level of trust in religious institutions in 2024 compared to state institutions or the media. This level of trust in religious entities has increased since 2022.

Democracy is valid only when it involves the participation of a reasonably well-informed electorate, as Brian McNair also writes. The inclusion of educated and well-informed citizens in decision-making is more than necessary in a pluralistic democracy. Information disorder affects democracy and has long-term consequences in sowing doubt and confusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's reflect on three key questions that highlight the challenges we face in North Macedonia when it comes to information disorders and informed citizenship.

Firstly, advocating for truth requires a committed effort to counteract misleading narratives and to enable diverse perspectives. In a society where external and internal malign influences often blur common sense, the responsibility to uphold truth becomes not merely a journalistic and research duty but a societal imperative.

Secondly, the spread of different information pieces and the dominance of digital echo chambers create big obstacles to sharing unbiased information. Despite these challenges, digital platforms offer opportunities for meaningful discussions. As responsible citizens and scholars, we should use these platforms wisely to share well-researched facts and help raise awareness about critical thinking.

Third, today, emotions overshadow facts, threatening democracy. It's crucial to value truth and keep the public informed. It's vital to rebuild trust in institutions by asking for transparency and accountability.Our goal is to create a society where truth is valued, informed decisions are made, and democracy is strong. The journey ahead may be tough, but with determination and commitment, we can work toward increasing societal resilience and improving social cohesion.

In the end, let's remember that seeking the truth is more than gaining knowledge; it's the foundation of our freedom.

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