

Hate and Propaganda Media and Narratives in North Macedonia



The political and economic basis of media and communication models spreading hate speech and disinformation



Most disinformation and hate speech in North Macedonia is created and transmitted online. Internet portals were the most common violators of professional standards in 2018–2020, while hate speech was most prevalent on social media.



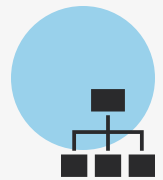
In recent years the largest political parties had information portals that were close to them and that they often used them to spread politically coloured texts or manipulations. Through advertisers affiliated with political parties, funds are allocated for advertising on such portals, which “calls into question the professionalism of journalism in those portals”.



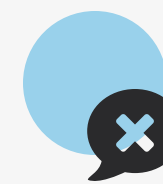
The most common remarks about the work of online media are the unsigned texts, mixing the news with the commentary, tendentious or misleading titles, manipulating content and photos, using content from domestic and foreign media without citing the source, and using content from social networks.



Online media outlets have no obligation to publish its financial data or sources of funding. Portals generally provide revenue from advertising, which has been on the rise since 2016. However, even online media outlets that continuously violate the Code of Ethics are fighting for a piece of the advertising cake.



Often, a group of online media outlets that support the same political and ideological views share the same text or photo, which might later be confirmed as disinformation or misinformation. Depending on the party they support, the narratives promote or criticize political, ideological, ethnic, or religious views.



Some of the unprofessional media portals do not have impressum, use inappropriate language and has a sensationalist approach to presenting information. There are also online media with larger newsrooms, with transparent ownership and longer tradition on the media market whose content is often reviewed by the fact checkers and self-regulatory bodies.



In recent years, public figures have posted hate speech on their social media profiles or websites. In the case-law of North Macedonia from 2016 to 2020, there was only one court case registered in the Basic Criminal Court for spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system, which was still being processed at the end of 2020.

Hate narratives and disinformation in online media and on social networks



Islamophobia and hostile vocabulary towards migrants and refugees, perceiving them as a threat to Macedonian society’s cultural values prevail especially on the social networks. However there was less hate speech against migrants and refugees on social networks in 2019–2020 compared to 2017.



Vocal groups with patriotic, traditional and mostly rightist ideological views, where strong nationalistic rhetoric is expressed, gather many supporters and generate heated discussion on Facebook in relation to the narratives against the Government, especially during elections or other relevant political events.



In 2020, there were cases in which several journalists and editors, including female journalists, were the target of threats, insults, defamation and hate speech via online media and social networks. Narratives against female journalists contain derogatory language, frequently on a gender basis, as well as stereotyped views and perceptions of women’s role in society.



The religious festivities during the pandemic lockdowns brought to the surface inter-ethnic and inter-faith divisions among ordinary people on social networks and online media, reflecting their inclination to political elites.



Calling each other “tribes”, “horde” and “savages” the representatives of different ethnic groups on the social networks both claim “legacy” to the territory of Macedonia and tackle identity issues.



Hate speech was the second most common reason for the violation of professional standards by media outlets, according to the Council of Media Ethics in 2019. The Helsinki Committee on Human Rights in March 2020, registered 100% increase in hate speech cases, compared to the same period the year before (govornaomraza.mk).



The Council of Media Ethics established the Registry of Professional Online Media in 2020. Even though 140 online media belong to the Registry, a number of online media have ignored the initiative as such or cannot join it due to multiple breaches of professional standards.



The elimination of hate speech and hate narratives from the public discourse requires the coordinated efforts of different institutional and civil actors in society, including the political elites which have a crucial role in the production and dissemination of such practices.



These are findings of the research on hate and propaganda models of media and communication and findings of the research on hate narratives in North Macedonia conducted in 2020 within the project “Resilience – Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey” in seven countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.