



MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS IN ONLINE MEDIA IN KOSOVO

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CONTENT

Introduction..... 1

Methodology4

Findings of the report..... 7

 Internal organization..... 10

 Identification of fake news 19

 Publication of news from foreign sources..... 22

 Professional capacity of the staff..... 29

 Conclusions and recommendations..... 33



INTRODUCTION

Identifying and fighting fake news and disinformation should be the primary task of media and media professionals in Kosovo. The rapid development of online media has caused fake, incomplete news and disinformation to spread rapidly – adding to the need to identify them as quickly as possible and to undertake measures so that such news does not take place in the media.

A number of online media do not have enough human capacity to deal with information properly, and as a consequence such information is often published as incomplete and not verified. The Internet offers a large number of news, which necessarily must undergo the needed verification before they are published. Lack of professional capacities and lack of care for accurate information causes the public to be served unprofessional and ethically problematic media content.

The Press Council of Kosovo (PCK), as the self-regulatory body of written and online media, has continuously committed itself, together with member and non-member media, to contribute to the increase in quality in reporting, given all the challenges facing the media, as well as the gaps that exist in the editorial chain.

The war in Ukraine has made online media in Kosovo to publish unverified news from unreliable sources. In the absence of fact-checking, some media have offered the public unilateral news, failing to provide a full perspective of the course of events there. It is necessary that online media establish the practice

of fact-checking before reporting on conflict zones and, at the same time, are careful in choosing the sources they use.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens have been influenced by fake news and conspiracy theories, published in online media. News from unreliable and suspicious sources have caused fear, panic and social uncertainty among the public. These concerns have been addressed by PCK in co-operation with member media editors.

The lack of editors and proofreaders in newsrooms directly affects the quality of news and the quality of reporting.

Based on PCK statistics and data provided by the media through the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the lack of links of the chain in preparing the news has produced many complaints against certain media for breach of code of ethics, and a considerable number of those complaints were approved by the PCK.

Through this research, PCK aimed to identify professional gaps in the media dealing with ethical and professional reporting, analyze the causes leading to the publication of unethical media content, as well as provide recommendations to improve the existing situation.

The media involved in the research have given a clear picture of their internal functioning in terms of the sources they choose to inform the public, as well as the procedures they follow for fact-checking through the editorial chain, but also the challenges they face during daily work. On the other hand, the interviewed experts have given proposals on what needs to be undertaken so that the quality of reporting improves and what are the possibilities for journalists and the media to be

more aware of the sources they choose to use during their work.

The member and non-member media of Press Council of Kosovo should be responsible in the way they deal with incomplete news, false news and disinformation, as well as to have clear procedures to be followed and the actions to be taken, as media platforms, in order to address these problems and to offer their audience complete, professional reporting and news based on Code of Ethics.

Fact-checking is essential for professional journalism, as is the need for strengthening control mechanisms within the news media, as a preventive measure for fake news and disinformation.

Recommendations from this research will serve PCK so that it can address the problems and challenges identified not only in the content of the Code of Ethics, but also as a contribution to the organization of various activities, such as trainings and roundtables, so that member media and others increase their responsibility when informing the public.



METHODOLOGY



The methodology of the research report was combined and included:

a. Analysis of documents and reports

Local and international documents and reports have been analyzed for the report, which include the area of fake news in Kosovo. These documents served as the basis for compiling a wide list of questions related to aspects of the handling of fake news by online media in Kosovo.

b. Questionnaire with PCK members and journalists

The Press Council of Kosovo has compiled a list of 34 questions sent to its member media. A total of 18 online media answered this questionnaire.

The questions were grouped into several categories and included:

- Internal organization of the media, in terms of staff who deal with the editing and verification of facts;
- Practices related to identifying news sources;
- Practices of publishing news from countries such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey;
- Professional capacities (training, education) of the staff;

c. Interviews with relevant actors

The Press Council of Kosovo has carried out a set of interviews with experienced journalists, editors, journalism and media lecturers to discuss answers received from the questionnaire and hear their recommendations for improving the practices of fighting fake news in Kosovo.



FINDINGS OF THE REPORT



The Press Council of Kosovo has compiled the list with a total of 34 questions related to practices of dealing with potentially untrue news by its member media.

The questions were divided into 4 categories included:

- Internal organization,
- Practices of identifying fake news,
- Practices of publishing news from foreign sources, and
- Professional capacities of the staff

This research carried out by the Press Council of Kosovo reflects the state of newsrooms in Kosovo in general, while addressing the issue of publishing false news and disinformation – be it through their production or redistribution.

The research brings forth a series of challenges facing online media in Kosovo – both large and small ones.

The responses to the survey carried out by the Press Council of Kosovo show a small numbers of media editors, small number of proofreaders, unclear (written and unwritten) practices of journalism ethics, although all respondents are members of the Press Council of Kosovo, not very consistent practices of publishing news from abroad, inconsistent practices of the process of revision of news in the process of publishing them, and so on.

According to the answers, the media does not take any concrete steps towards a journalist for whom it has been reported to have made violations, thus encouraging, in a way, the production of fake news.

Also, there may also suggestions that the appointed editors themselves, in a way, can promote the production of fake news by not taking measures against journalists who violate journalism ethics and the Press Code of Kosovo.

It is also worrying that the media surveyed in no case have mentioned any concrete co-operation with fact-checkers in Kosovo. Thus verification is carried out by the medium itself, by staff who is unprepared for this task, thus making quite difficult the process of establishing the truth of a piece of news or statement published by other media.

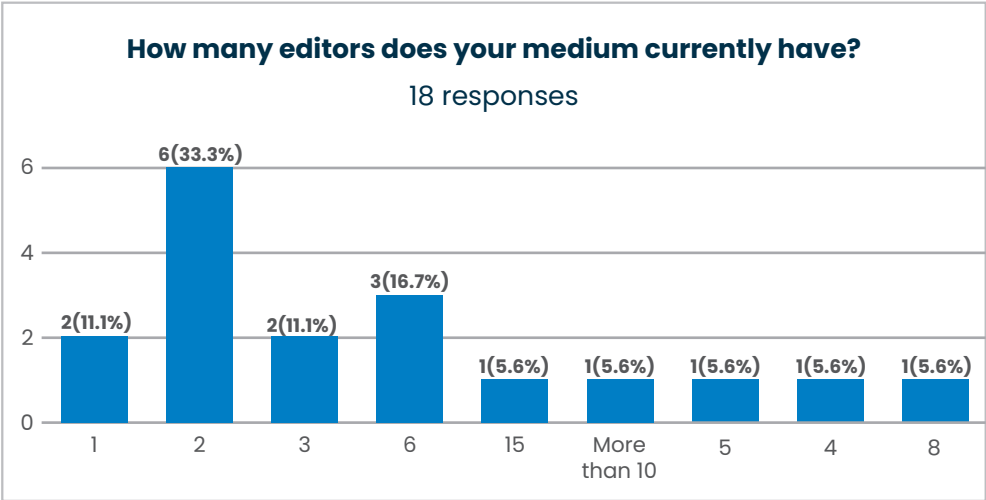
Further are the answer to the questions per the aforementioned categories.



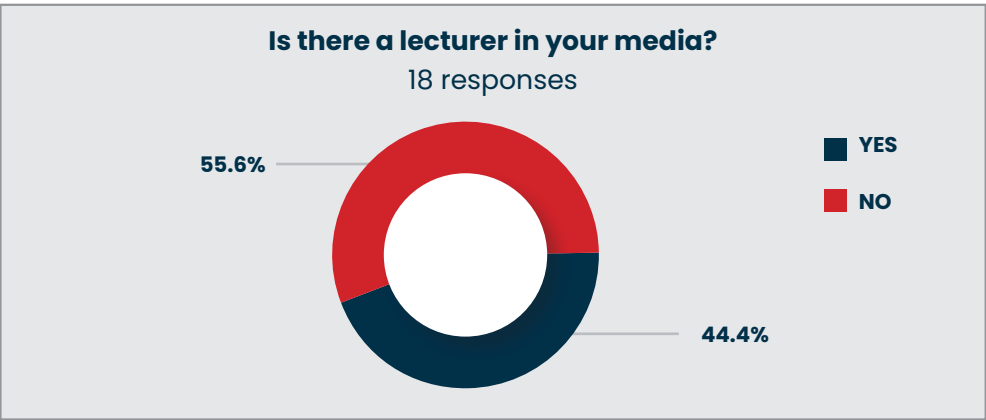
INTERNAL ORGANIZATION



This set of questions addressed a range of issues related to the internal organization of the medium.



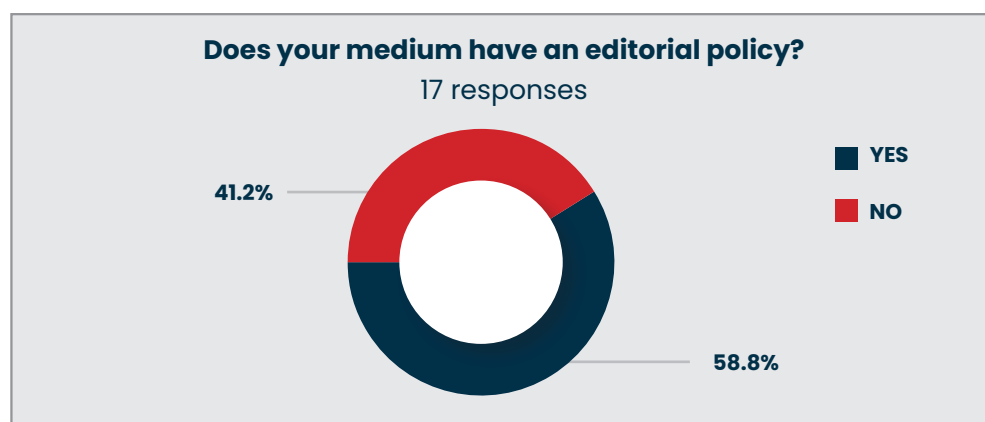
6 of the 18 media involved in the survey, or 33% of respondents, have stated that their medium has 2 editors. Interestingly, one media outlet has stated that their newsroom has over 10 editors and has supported this with a link on their website¹.



¹ <https://telegrafi.com/per-ne/>

More than half of respondents have said that their media outlet has no proofreader, while 44.4% or 8 of the 18 respondents have responded that their media outlet has a proofreader.

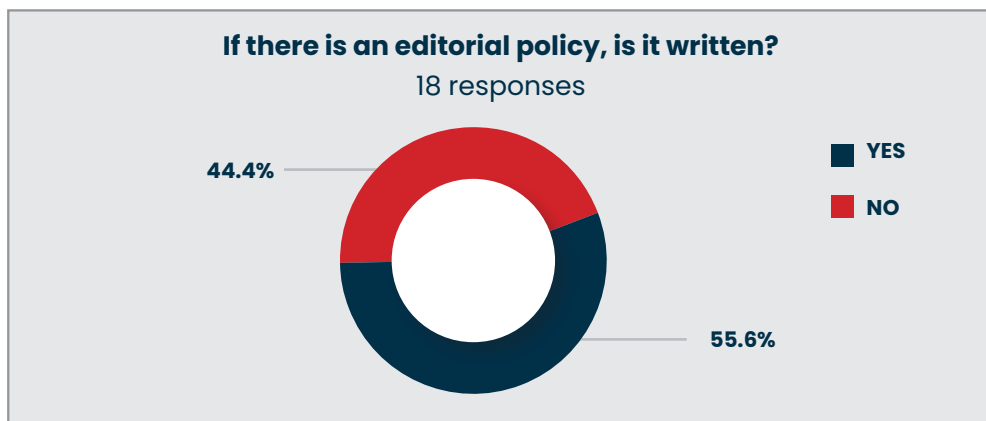
This fact may be considered worrying because the proofreader may be the one who could identify the presence of elements of fake news. The proofreader is an important filter before the publication of a news story.



According to Dren Gerguri, lecturer of journalism at the University of Prishtina, various actors can contribute to various forms in combating disinformation and misinformation in our society.

“Small media outlets should try to respect the professional and ethical standards of doing journalism, which would minimize the possibility of disseminating false information”², Gerguri said.

² Interview with DrenGerguri, lecturer at UP, conducted on June 2, 2022

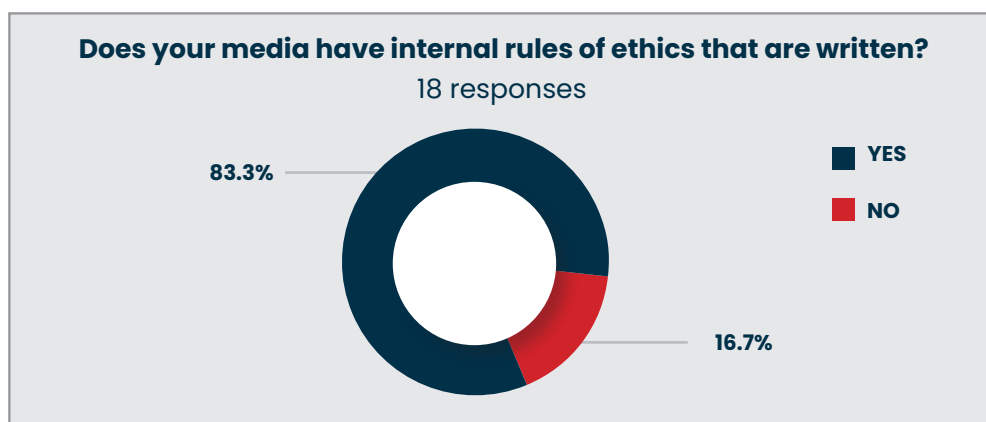


Another interesting element is that over 40 of respondents, or 7 of the 18 media outlets surveyed stated that their media outlet has no written editorial policies, thus making quite difficult the practices of identifying and verifying facts before the publication of fake news. Those who do have editorial policies, have them in written form.

According to Jeton Mehmeti from the Independent Media Commission, media outlets in Kosovo do not control the source of the information.

“Journalists in their daily work do not have a critical opinion, which would have made them question any information they receive from every media outlet. If the mechanisms of other media, which only publish the news have a fact-checking mechanism, have their own editorial policies, they would not have published them and would not have distributed them, but in the absence of such a policy, in the absence of processes we have redistribution of each piece of news that is produced”³, said Mehmeti.

³ Interview with Jeton Mehmeti, member of Independent Media Commission. The interview was conducted on June 1, 2022.



83.3% of respondents or 15 media outlets have stated that they have internal ethical rules, which are in written form. 3 media outlets stated that they had no written rules. The answers were different in terms of how these rules were compiled.

These are some of the forms in which these rules are set:

- In the internal rules of procedure of the media outlet
- Inside the offices, in HR procedures,
- In the editorial code written and published in the newsroom,
- In the soon-to-be-available code online, so that any possible error or violation of this code is addressed by citizens themselves,
- In the contract,
- Exposed in the newsroom,
- Only within the Code of Ethics,
- In the rules of the Press Council of Kosovo that are applicable,
- In the internal code,
- In the internal rules of work of the media outlet
- In the Code of Ethics,

- In the documents of the organization that each employee must read and understand before the beginning of the working relationship and must follow them,
- In the agreement, the contract and printed on the wall,
- In the Rules of Procedure.

According to Flutura Kusari, media law expert, in the context of Kosovo the priority is the application of the current code and in convincing non-member media outlets to join the Press Council of Kosovo, as well as to engage further so that the current members respect the PCK's decisions.

"The priority is to work with what we have instead of spending time and energy updating the code and regulations. The current code is quite good, it creates clear obligations for reporting based on ethics, ethical standards. So, to improve our situation, the Council must be empowered to have the chance to implement the code"⁴, Kusari stressed.

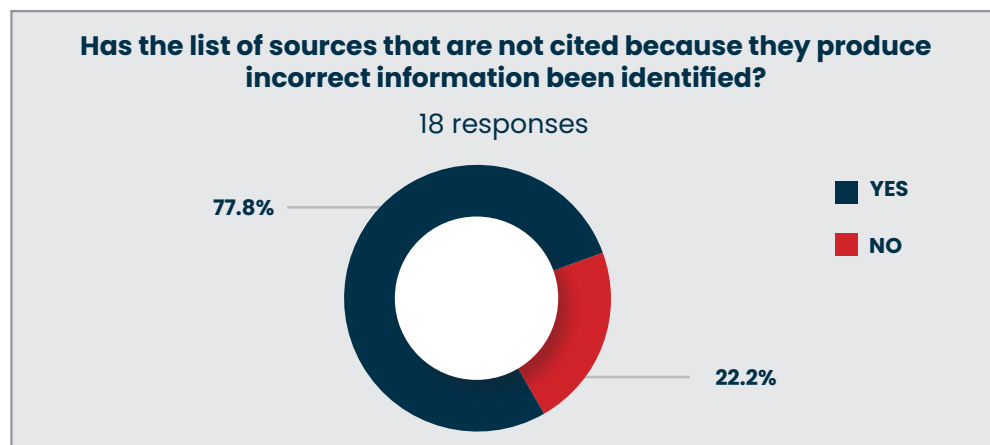
On the question of how many percent of the staff are seniors and how many are interns, the answers were different. They ranged from statements that 100% of staff are senior to media outlets that have no interns in their news desks.

The next question had to do with the percentage of original articles and the percentage of republished articles.

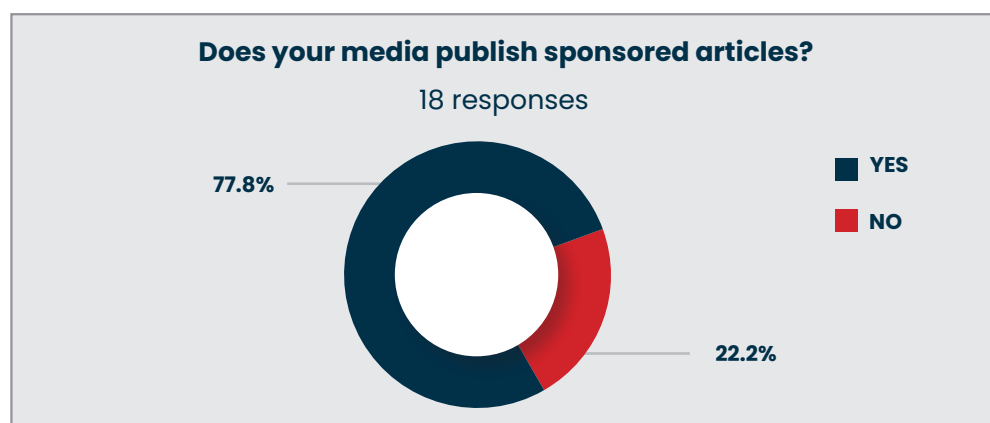
Most respondents stated that the major part or all articles are original, except those that are from international news, which are translated and then published. One media outlet stated that they have no measurements for this and publish both original texts and articles from other media outlets respecting the rules of citing the sources.

⁴ Interview with Flutura Kusari, media law expert, conducted on June 3, 2022.

What is noted in the responses is that all respondents have stated that the percentage of original texts exceeds those which are taken or translated (i.e. over 50% of the articles of all media outlets involved in this research are original).



As can be seen from the graph above, 77,8% of respondents or a total of 14 out of 18 media outlets identify the list of sources that are not cited because they produce inaccurate information.



Does your media identify sponsored articles?

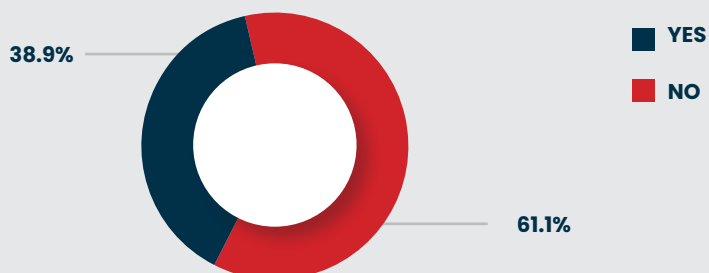
17 responses



As for sponsored texts, only 4 out of a total of 18 media outlets involved in the survey stated that they do not publish sponsored texts. Almost 90% of media outlets or 15 of them identify such publications as sponsored.

Is the owner of your media also the director of the media?

18 responses



As for the issue of media ownership and the practice that the owner should not be the director of the media outlet, in more than 40% of cases, or in 7 media outlets the owner and the director is the same person. In 11 media outlets which were part of this survey, the owner and the director of the media outlet are different persons.

Is the editor-in-chief of your media also the director of the media?

18 responses



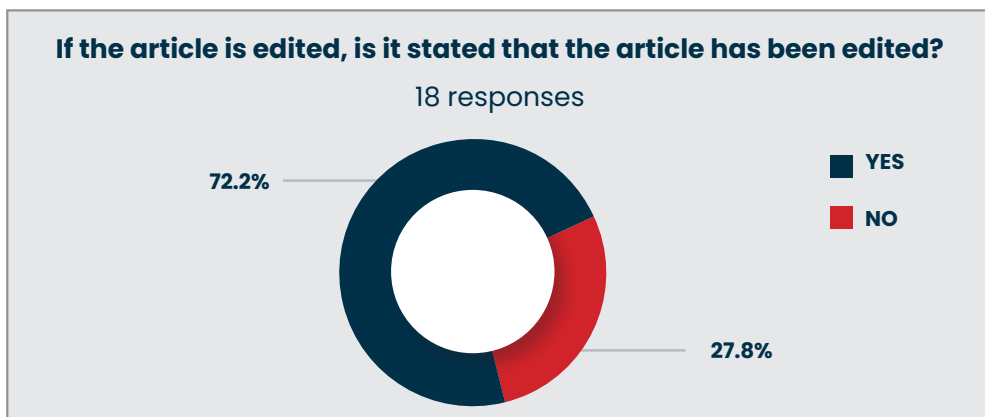
A similar situation can be found concerning the practice that the editor-in-chief should not be the director of the media outlet. In 33% of cases, or in 6 media outlets the editor-in-chief and the director is the same person. In 12 surveyed media outlets, the editor-in-chief and the director of the outlet are different people.



IDENTIFICATION OF FAKE NEWS



The group includes questions related to practices of identification, verification and publication of fake news.



Over 70% of respondents, or 13 media outlets, stated that the article mentions whether it was revised, while this is not the practice of 5 outlets involved in this research.

Despite these statements, Kosovo media do not often follow such practices in cases where the revision of news takes place.



5 media outlets involved in this survey took disciplinary measures against journalists and editors for violations of the Code of Ethics. Over 70% of media outlets stated that they have not taken any measures.

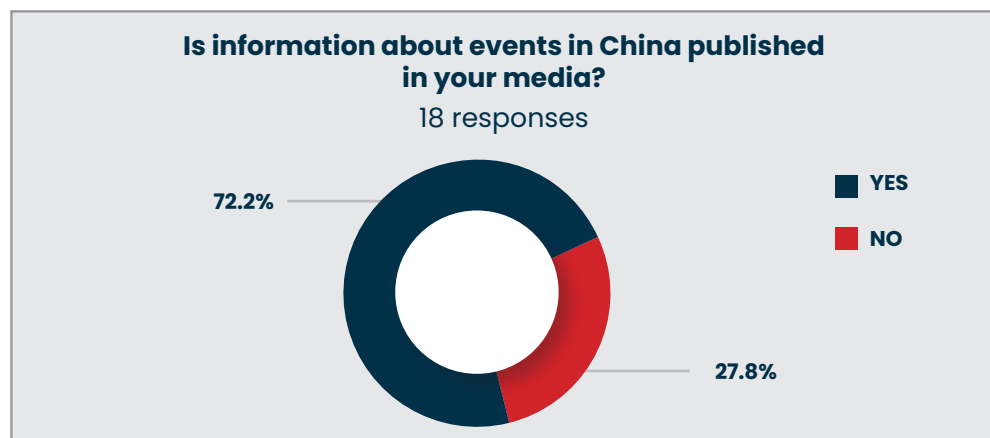
These figures can be considered worrying since, by undertaking nothing, the media outlet in a way promotes unethical reporting on the part of journalists.



PUBLICATION OF NEWS FROM FOREIGN SOURCES



This set of questions included aspects and practices of publishing news from China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.



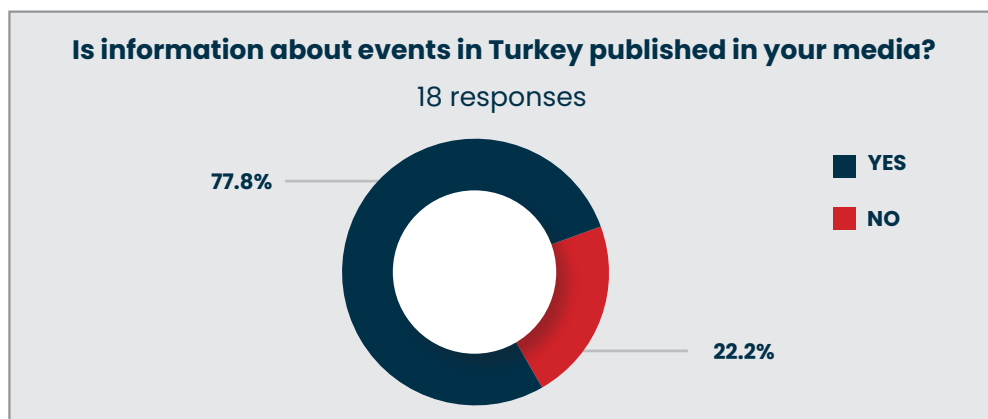
Those who have answered this question negatively (27.8%), listed the following reasons for such a decision:

- We are more focused on local and regional news,
- There's no interest,
- They're not interesting,
- We are more are focused on local, national and regional information,
- The media outlet has a certain profile and it deals with the area of rule of law.

Those who have responded positively to this question (72.2%), listed the following criteria and interest for such a decision:

- Only in cases where there are analyses of political developments, which can show China's presence or influence in the region,
- The criterion is for the news to be verified and to quote the source of the media outlet that publishes that piece of news,
- The interest is to inform the public opinion with events in the world – in this case also with events in China,

- A small number of news that are translated from the media outlet such as BBC and enters into the category of world news,
- All information from China is taken from western prestigious media (BBC, The Guardian, The New York Times, VOX, etc.) and not from Chinese media,
- Topics selected for the world news section,
- Mainly articles dealing with China's economic influence in Balkan countries,
- As a media outlet dealing with economic topics, articles about China's investments in the Balkans,
- They are also verified by Western reliable media outlets.



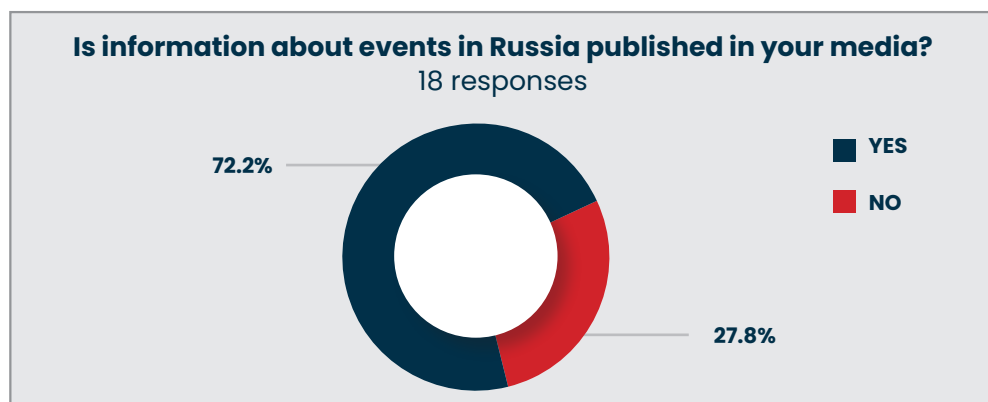
Those who have answered this question negatively (22.2%), listed the following reasons for such a decision:

- They only publish events of world character,
- They publish more local and regional news,
- There is no interest.

Those who have responded positively to this question (77.8%), listed the following criteria and interest for such a decision:

- Cases that relate to developments around journalists and journalism, human rights, issues about Turkey's influence in the region, or about the Albanian diaspora there,

- If anything constitutes news, it doesn't matter where it takes place,
- There is an interest of readers for news from Turkey, as many reasons relate to Kosovo and the Balkans,
- Political information,
- Mainly articles concerning the economic situation in Turkey, but also the Kosovo-Turkey trade exchanges,
- There are many Turkish businesses in Kosovo, as well as considerable trade exchange – therefore it is of interest.



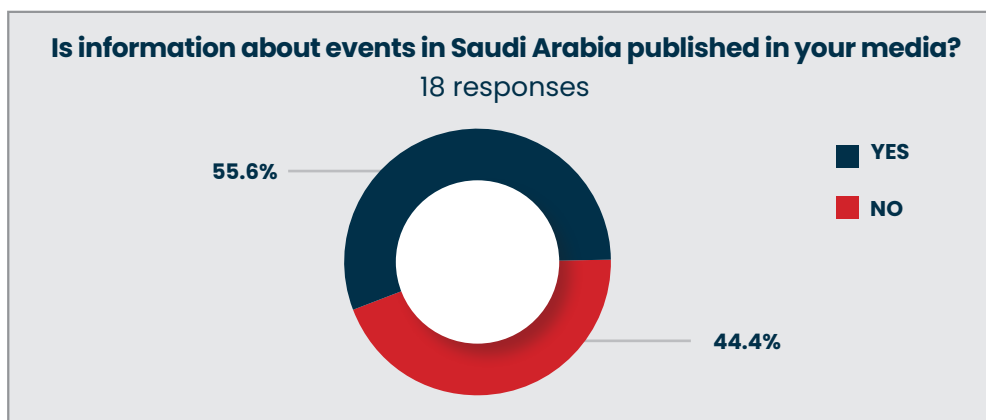
Those who have answered this question negatively (27%), listed the following reasons for such a decision:

- Their media outlet has no concept of daily news reporting and follows policies of weather forecasting, climate change, environmental protection, etc.
- They think they are censored news,
- They have more local and regional news.

Those who have responded positively to this question (72.2%), listed the following criteria and interest for such a decision:

- Only in cases of analyses of political developments, which deal with Russia's presence or influence in the region,

- The same answers as in the case with China and Turkey,
- The medium is multiethnic and most news is published in Serbian-Bosnian, but also in Albanian and is also in the interest of readers to know about the events in big countries such as Russia,
- The war in Ukraine,
- The publication of news about the impact of the war on Ukraine, EU countries, but also in Kosovo,
- There is public interest especially in the war in Ukraine.



Those who have responded negatively to this question (44.4%), listed the following criteria and interest for such a decision:

- They publish more local and regional news,
- There is no interest of the readers.

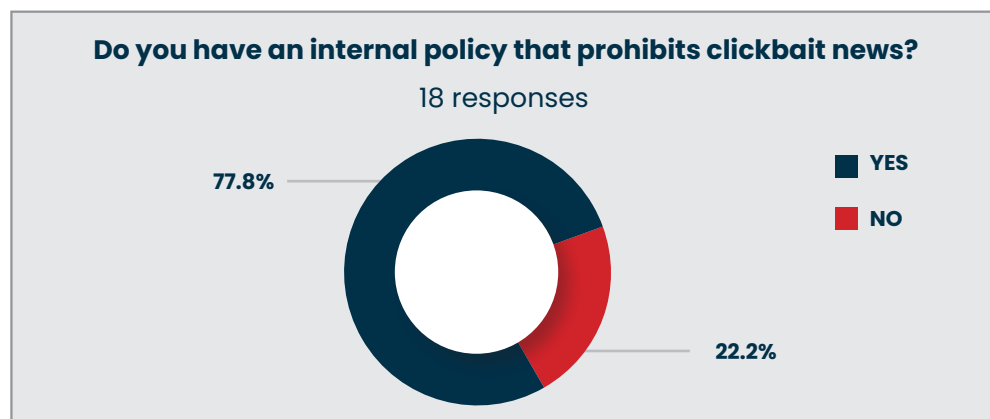
Those who have responded positively to this question (55.6%), listed the following criteria and interest for such a decision:

- Criterion is for the news to be verified and quoted as the source of the news from the media outlet that publishes it. This is also in the interest of the readers,
- The same answers as in the case of China, Turkey and Russia,

- This country is not on a blacklist of the media outlet, because there is no such thing,
- Very rarely news is published from Arabia,
- Very rarely, if it's very important.

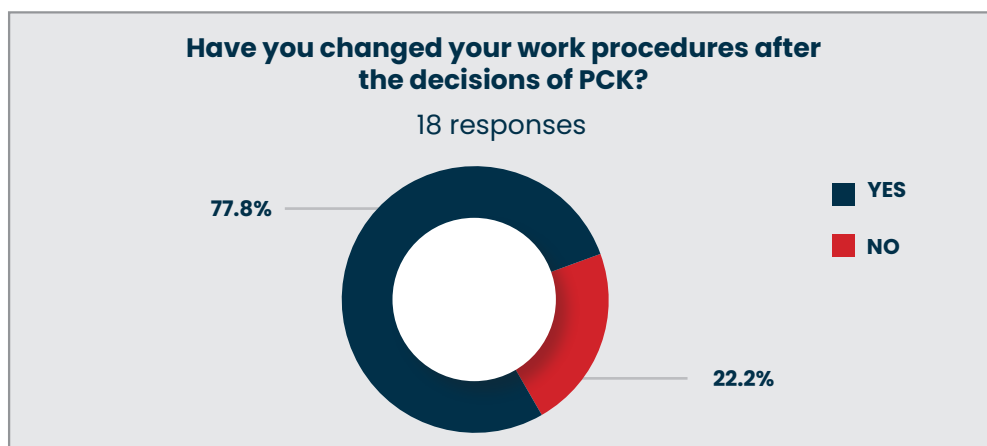
According to the long-time journalist and former PCK director Nehat Islami, the Press Council can do a lot to fight fake news.

"Member media can appear as frequently as possible in electronic media, or require that the media have a section which deals only with fake and true news. This would raise the viewers, readers' awareness,"⁵, said Islami.



As for the clickbait news, 77.8% of the media outlets, or 14 of them stated that they have internal policy that prohibits clickbait news, while 4 of them have no such policies.

⁵ Interview with Nehat Islami, former director of PCK



Similarly, 14 online media members of the Press Council stated that they have changed the working procedures after PCK's decisions, while 4 media outlets have not done so.

These figures do not correspond to measures that the media have taken against journalists, who have not respected the Code of Ethics (see the previous questions).

According to Kreshnik Gashi, IFCN fact-checker and managing editor in Kallxo.com, one of the biggest mistakes Kosovo has made is the lack of sustainable funding for the Press Council, as the most creditable mechanism that would have fixed the issue of online media in Kosovo.

*"Press Council is left in the hands of the fate of donors, in the hands of the fate of self-regulation while on the other side the various models of the world show that states have offered funds for press councils, to ensure that this mechanism manages to fulfill its function – the media monitoring, education, promotion of values in journalism"*⁶, Gashi said.

⁶ Interview with Kreshnik Gashi, conducted on June 2, 2022.



PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY OF THE STAFF



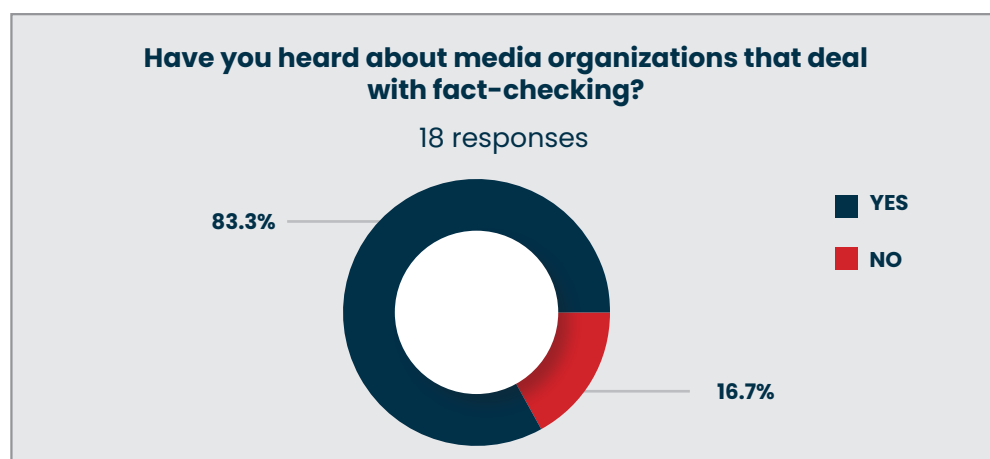
The group included questions concerning the professional capacities of the staff, the training journalists have attended regarding fact-checking procedures.

On the question of how many journalists have attended training in the last year, nearly half of the media surveyed stated that they have not attended any training. There are media outlets that attended between 1 and 8 trainings over the last year.

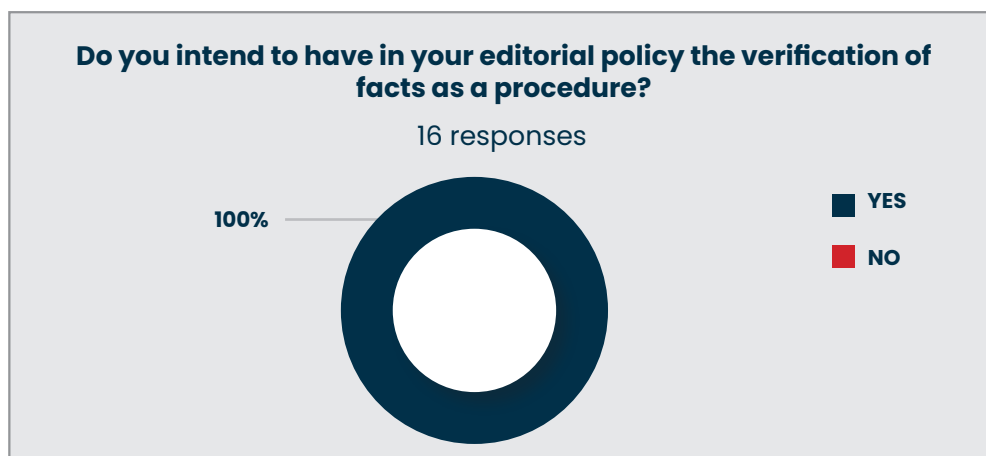
Among the trainings mentioned are those organized by the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, Media for All, British Council, Training of the State Department of the United States, etc.

One media outlet stated that all staff undergo training at the beginning of the working relationship and are updated with trainings during the work process.

On the question of how many editors have attended professional training during the last year, the responses were 1 to 4, but some media outlets stated that they have not attended any training, citing the situation with COVID-19 as a reason for this.



15 surveyed media, or 83,3% of respondents, stated that they heard of fact-checking organisations, while 3 media outlets said they have not heard of such organizations.



All media outlets involved in this research stated that they aim to have the verification of the facts as a procedure in their editorial policy.

As far as funding sources are concerned, the media outlets surveyed have cited various sources. As per the percentage from clicks, political party advertising, businesses, donations, government funds, respondents listed:

- 90% from donors, 10% from own income,
- 20% from clicks, 5% from political party advertising (only during election campaigns), 30% from businesses, 0% from donations and government funds,
- 100% from businesses advertising in the media outlet,
- 80% from media customers and 19% from business advertising, 1% from clicks,
- All of the income only from business advertising and clicks. None from political party ads, donations and government funds,

- Donations, advertising, clicks, government funds,
- 10% from clicks, 2% from political party ads, 80% from businesses, 8% from donations,
- 70% from business advertising, 30% from grants won with various projects,
- 100% from donations,
- 50% from donations, 30% from businesses, 20% from other sources
- 70% from donations, 30% from businesses,



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



- Various actors can contribute to various forms in combating disinformation and misinformation in Kosovo society.
- The media should try to respect the professional and ethical standards of journalism as much as possible, which would minimize the possibility of disseminating false information.
- Media in the country must confute disinformation or misinformation circulating online, on news portals or various pages and groups on social media.
- Journalists should take into account that in their work there is also a commitment to exposing disinformation and combating false information.
- The media should work harder on fact-checking either within the media outlet or by cooperating with individuals or organizations dealing with fact-checking.
- The media should be more careful about the sources of information they use, targeting creditable and verifiable sources.
- The media should highlight all cases when the specific article is edited/revised.
- The media must have clear practices of identifying sources and verifying facts before publishing the news.
- Government institutions must respond, extending media education to society and creating the most suitable environment for professional journalism, such as through improving the implementation of labor law or through dealing more seriously with cases of threats to journalists.

This would improve conditions for journalism and directly fight disinformation.

- By agreeing to follow the ethical code and increased transparency, PCK members would contribute to the fight against disinformation.
- Adding capacities in the media (proofreaders and editors), in the chain of production, editing and publishing of the news, would help in the growth of professionalism in the media.
- Journalists and editors need to be provided more opportunities for training involving fact-checking, deconstructing fake news and dealing with suspicious sources of information.

