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Interjection

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The Sun Rises in the Morning, Not in the Evening

On the Self-inflicted Causes of the Crisis in Journalism

Christoph Plate

The economic hardships facing many media outlets are currently stifling any discussion about these organisations' own culture of error and the urgent need for humility among journalists. However, journalism can only survive if it gets back to basics by refocusing on its core responsibilities and distancing itself from mere propaganda, activism and sensationalism.

When Edi Rama chats with journalists, it rarely bodes well for a fruitful discussion. At least, that is certainly what many media professionals in the Balkans believe. After all, the Albanian Prime Minister does not think very highly of journalists – or at least, not of those in Albania. Rama is a charismatic artist, a former basketball player and a scion of the Stalinist elite that ruled when his country was as isolated as North Korea is today. All three elements – that is, art, sport and an elitist mindset – underpin his political style. However, unlike many other Balkan politicians, Rama still talks to journalists. In fact, he even carries on talking when there's hardly anyone left to listen.

When Rama was due to address an international media conference in the Hotel International's conference hall in Tirana in the autumn of 2023, the Prime Minister entered with long, lanky strides, acting as if he wasn't the least bit aware of the generally hostile atmosphere among the journalists present. A politician who is currently busy getting his country into shape for EU membership, Rama is widely regarded as someone who thinks that media was at its best in Western Europe in the 1990s. On stage, he flips over the speech script prepared by his office and scribbles a few notes on the back. Rama is a shrewd operator – a master of rhetoric whose relaxed, even condescending manner ruffles his opponents' feathers as he makes no secret of his air of superiority. Rather than deliver a statesmanlike speech at the Hotel International, he chooses to share his personal take on modern journalism: He's been derogatorily called a homosexual in addition to having been accused of extramarital affairs and child abuse, he says, and he wonders

how this sort of reporting – or in some cases, outright defamation – is supposed to help move the country forward.

The reactions in the room – and in front of the Albanian TV cameras – are unmistakable: Some listeners hiss back in disrespect, while others ask questions in a shaky voice that are in fact not genuine questions at all, but merely attempts to defend the journalistic profession. There is no discussion of the fact that Rama's criticisms are at least partly accurate: namely that many media outlets could improve how they deal with errors and that a culture of impunity in journalism leads to sloppy work and even activism.

Most of the journalists present refuse to engage with the core of the debate or simply ignore the opportunity for dialogue. However, up there on the podium sits a man who – although he handles dissent rather harshly and has even been accused of intimidation – is making a deliberate, pointed contribution at this media conference to call attention to wounds that many media professionals would rather ignore. And this is not just happening in Albania or in the Balkans; in fact, it is also happening in Western Europe, including in Germany. Serious, well-grounded journalism must be able to distance itself from poor-quality reporting, and it must be accountable both to its audience and to itself. It seems that journalism needs to get back to its roots and recommit to its core mission and standards.

What the debate in Tirana makes abundantly clear is that many journalists are all too willing to defend their profession wholesale without pressing for a clear break from those who engage in

entirely different practices, such as activism or propaganda. In troubled times such as these, it is not only in Albania that a form of journalism has to be called out that is not truly what it claims to be despite often being regarded as such by the public. Even those who reject sensationalist reporting still seem ready to stand by their profession, adhering to the old adage that one crow never plucks out another's eye. While doctors or architects might openly criticise serious errors made by their peers and lodge complaints with their respective associations, journalism tends to be marked by a sense of solidarity that is rationalised time and again by the need to defend the freedom of the press.

Journalism must rekindle the awareness of political issues among media consumers.

Quality media in other countries are also not always on top of things, often responding with a self-satisfied, blustering sort of defiance. The self-righteous way in which *Der Spiegel* dealt with the case of the award-winning fabricator Claas Relotius speaks volumes, as do the failings of his superiors, especially when the magazine's own shortcomings are boldly spun into a grand literary narrative. The top brass at *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also responded in a rather petulant manner to criticism of its coverage of politician Hubert Aiwanger and to probing questions about the journalistic accuracy of its former deputy editor-in-chief, who had been accused of plagiarism. An inquiry eventually concluded that while there was no evidence of outright copying, she had indeed flouted journalistic standards.

Moreover, if even the seasoned pros are openly ignoring such standards, what are young journalists supposed to think? In the summer of 2024, an international conference for young investigative journalists was held on the picturesque Croatian coast near Dubrovnik. Every kind of journalism should actually be probing

and inquisitive – or in other words, investigative; therefore, the very notion of “investigative journalism” is itself something of a tautology. However, what was even more striking was that at the start, young journalists from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria and several other south-eastern European countries were handed their conference materials in a linen bag, as it is common practice at such events, with the bag often being emblazoned with a catchy slogan. The bag that was distributed in Dubrovnik bore the stark warning: “Don't copy-paste – investigate”. The fact that a reputable conference had to spell out the obvious – namely that plagiarism is simply unacceptable – speaks volumes about the gravity of the situation.

It goes without saying that journalism can and should be political: Indeed, it must rekindle the awareness of political issues among media consumers. However, according to media manager Leila Bičakčić, who works for an investigative portal in Sarajevo, it is a problem if political opinion outweighs journalistic expertise.¹ Media expert Fidel Hadebe adds that those in charge of newsrooms should never exploit their privileged positions to engage in partisan battles. Hadebe is from South Africa, where attempts to politically influence newsrooms are a daily reality.² What sort of journalism awaits us when objectivity is no longer an option – when everyone sees that it simply doesn't exist, asks the UK's *Economist*, warning that if everyone begins concocting their own version of reality, chaos is inevitable.³ Meanwhile, in Tirana, Edi Rama quotes British historian Timothy Garton Ash, who once remarked that opinions are always free, but facts come at a price.

Journalism is a noble calling. There is a clear distinction between producing bricks or biscuits and engaging in journalism that sifts through information for the public and helps shape opinion. The latter comes with the obligation to handle responsibility conscientiously. Far too many journalists today seem driven by what Tübingen media scholar Bernhard Pörksen calls a “yearning for certainty”⁴: People want to be able to believe in something, to declare it to be the truth

and to be entitled to an opinion – all in order to define their own position and to feel like they are part of a like-minded community. However, the deeper the research goes, the more it reveals a host of answers – and with them, also plenty of uncertainty. Furthermore, sometimes, that very uncertainty is laid bare, ultimately leading to the honest admission that in the end, we simply cannot be absolutely sure.

Anyone who churns out shoddy bricks or bakes bland biscuits is bound to disappear from the market eventually. Sometimes, though, consumers might give them another chance – simply out of curiosity in order to see what the failing manufacturer will do to save himself, or other times because they’ve trusted the product for generations, be it detergent or the daily newspaper. Journalism can also benefit from a measure of consumer leniency, but this cannot happen too

often. Without a willingness to embrace self-criticism and the humility needed to respect both the audience and the profession, journalism simply cannot fulfil its purpose.

We need journalists who constantly question whether their work serves the search for truth or merely fuels self-promotion.

So why aren’t journalists more inclined to adopt practices that have long been embraced by others? If athletes are willing to come clean about doping and the Catholic Church is forced to confront the painful truth that perhaps only open



United in mutual dislike? Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama speaks to the press in December 2022 at the EU Western Balkans Summit in Tirana. Many journalists see him as someone who looks down on the media. He himself complains about the spread of false reports, including about his private life. [Photo: © Pixsell, Imago.](#)

debate about abuse can save it, then the media should also be prepared to engage in a frank discussion about their own culture of error. They ought to explain why they choose to cover one story and not another, what significance they attach to a given story, how they stumbled upon it and how they tracked its development. Consumers are entitled to all this information, and they are often genuinely interested in the details.

Journalism is needed now more than ever, and especially the kind of serious reporting that takes time. The big wide world – and even the little one we inhabit ourselves – is becoming increasingly chaotic, more difficult to explain and nearly impossible to understand. Journalism that dares to go where things stink and that asks questions that hurt can at least help us make sense of it all. We need journalists who constantly question whether their work serves the search for truth or merely fuels their own agenda and self-promotion.

Media professionals need to be able to distance themselves from propagandists and activists.

Bosnian media manager Leila Bičakčić recounts how she discovered that the young journalists she had hired already held strong opinions on issues – opinions that might have been welcomed if these journalists had not been solely geared towards finding evidence to back up their own personal prejudices. Moreover, anyone working in Sarajevo – such as Bičakčić – knows all too well how dangerous such prejudices can be, especially given the history of religious and ethnic hatred in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The young Bosnian journalists were let go because they were activists – champions of a supposedly worthy cause, but not real journalists.

Media professionals need to be able to distance themselves from propagandists and activists. The greatest threat to journalism is not just fake

news, propaganda or figures such as Vladimir Putin with his trolls and disinformation campaigns; rather, it is also those who do a poor job and slap the label “journalism” on their results, be it out of convenience, a lack of resources or activist zeal. In an era when journalism is mimicking social media, as Swiss publicist Roger de Weck points out, it is becoming increasingly difficult to truly reach audiences. Journalism also requires a willingness to be self-critical: If journalists are constantly telling politicians and managers what they can do better, they should also show a willingness to listen themselves, demands de Weck.⁵

Some media consumers yearn for a medium that simply states things as they are – one whose journalists are not on an endless self-promotion trip and in which substance comes before style. A wall is white and not yellow, and the sun rises in the morning and not in the evening – end of discussion. Just like the good old news agencies of the past, which did not editorialise, but merely reported the facts.

One man in Montenegro is striving to do exactly that, and he has been successful because he consistently navigates the turbulent social forces in his country with credible claims to impartiality. When you visit physicist Jasa Jovicevic and his team, the first thing you notice is a socialist block of flats and a bare room filled with computers. However, what the co-owner of the MINA news agency in Podgorica’s Stari Aerodrom district has to say about their work quickly makes you forget all about the drab concrete setting. Over the past 20 years, Jovicevic – along with several partners and with the then support of USAID – has built something that appears to be nothing short of a small miracle in a country of barely 600,000 inhabitants: He and his team of one and a half dozen journalists produce up to one hundred or more news reports a day and boast subscriptions from Montenegrin media, embassies in Podgorica and various government ministries. The agency has been consolidated with the backing of a telecommunications firm that was sold profitably a few years ago, a state-of-the-art TV studio in the basement rented out

to external producers and a lucrative cloud business. For Jovicevic, it's all about credibility in an extremely polarised society, with the aim being to establish the agency as a reliable news source. Amidst the country's political divides, the enterprise adheres to the old-fashioned credo of a good news agency, reporting only what has truly been verified.

Some time ago in Podgorica, for instance, a rumour was circulating that former Thai Prime Minister Sinawatra might have obtained Montenegrin citizenship. Being a news agency, MINA reached out to the Thai ministries and the local residents' registration office, but no one was willing to confirm the report. Instead of running a story merely to note that unverified rumours were circulating, the agency opted not to publish it at all. Even some reputable media outlets in Germany might have been tempted to run such a story, perhaps with a disclaimer that it was unclear how much of it was true. In Podgorica, it eventually emerged that the former Thai Prime Minister was indeed the holder of a Montenegrin passport; however, as Jovicevic points out, that lost story is simply the price to be paid for reliability. Along with his editor-in-chief Milan Zugic, Jovicevic says that 15 years ago, the whole race was simply to be the first to publish a story. "I never imagined that today, being accurate, precise and reliable would become so crucial", says Jovicevic. He believes in the future of news journalism, says the businessman who has evolved into a passionate publisher.

Journalism often resorts to outrage – much like as is seen on social media. And this phenomenon is not limited only to the Balkans. Indeed, in South Africa, Nigeria and even Germany, cancel culture is spreading as if journalism were some kind of cult – and in a cult, there's no room for deviation from the norm. Is cancelling then merely a timid and unsophisticated reaction on the part of journalists to the complexities of our modern world? Is it a defiant response to working conditions that haven't actually improved? Do we simply dismiss a person or their views because we lack the time or inclination to engage with the subject? Or do we fall for

the deliberate provocation of a newspaper such as Die Welt – and then become indignant about the printing of a second-rate piece by Elon Musk, the head of X?

The situation is serious: It is a matter of survival for informative journalism that contextualises and helps guide decisions. Not all journalists seem to grasp how dramatic things have become – especially those who don't have to worry about a financial plan for their medium because they're backed by philanthropists. Some time after the scene with Edi Rama in Tirana described above, an Albanian journalist representing a respected, award-winning investigative platform – one that is funded by Western grants – declared that anyone who shares a panel with Rama to discuss press freedom is complicit simply because Rama is notoriously unfriendly to the Albanian media. The environmental editor got so worked up that a previously peaceful lunch was nearly derailed. However, journalism that circulates exclusively within its own cult-like peer group – that is, within a group that refuses to engage in dialogue with opponents – is unlikely to have a future, be it economically or – ultimately – ideologically.

– translated from German –

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- 1 Interview with Leila Bičakčić in Sarajevo in May 2024.
- 2 Hadebe, Fidel 2021: Media must act against its rogues, The Mail & Guardian, 6 Feb 2021, in: <https://ogy.de/upg3> [27 Jan 2025].
- 3 The Economist 2020: Invisible men – How objectivity in journalism became a matter of opinion, 16 Jul 2020, in: <https://ogy.de/855q> [27 Jan 2025].
- 4 Lecture by Professor Bernhard Pörksen, Interlink Academy Hamburg, 14 Oct 2024.
- 5 De Weck, Roger 2024: Das Prinzip Trotzdem. Warum wir den Journalismus vor den Medien retten müssen, Berlin.