



Cumulative Report on Debates in the “Target the Media!” section on the MediaForum Platform

Period: March 25 2015 – March 1, 2016

Overview

During March 25, 2015 – March 1, 2016, 6 debates were held in the section “Mediacritica”, later renamed “Target the Media!”. Since this section is designed for media consumers, representatives of the civil society, activists known for their civil positions or thought leaders were selected/invited as facilitators. The topics related to various events or subjects that the media covered during the respective period. Consumers were invited to comment on journalists’ performance and the quality of stories. The topics were identified by the Content Manager of the platform, and agreed with the Project Director and then proposed to the facilitators. In some cases, the topics were suggested by facilitators.

Topics and debate process

1. “Crisis of the Leu: information manipulation as a cover for price rise”

The MediaForum platform was launched in the spring of 2015, when the currency market in Moldova had gone through a series of swings of the Euro and Dollar rates, happening against the background of Prime-Minister election and Government voting. There were voices in the media saying that currency rate oscillations, although unjustified, determined the price growth. The project team proposed this subject to facilitator Doru Petruți. The debate took place at the time the operation of the platform was tested, taking into account that this was the first debate in the “Mediacritica” category. The discussion gathered 5 comments; this small number may also be justified by the specifics of the topic – although it affects them directly,

few media consumers dared to comment on an economic subject. The few people who expressed their opinions agreed that the media, being "politically divided", and the independent media being "insufficient", was unable to do more than it did to inform citizens. As one of the users said, what happened was manipulation of the public opinion.

2. "How much do opinion polls matter?"

Since facilitator Doru Petruți is a sociologist by profession and the manager of a Polls Agency, the Content Manager proposed him this topic, as media consumers are often presented the results of various opinion polls on political, economic, and social topics. The purpose of the debate was to collect opinions of the consumers to see how much they trust polls, how they consume them, how they compare them, and what they pay attention to when they read such news. The discussion gathered 16 comments; it was balanced and was of high interest to the users. The facilitator has attached to the opening text a Code on conducting polls, which is used by European pollsters.

One of the users expressed his skepticism about the polls, saying that they do not reflect the reality but rather the trends. In addition, he criticized the way the media uses and presents data from the polls, bringing a hilarious example when a TV station transformed the percentage from a poll into MPs' seats and got 105 mandates, while the Parliament of Chisinau has only 101 seats. Most of the users called on the reporters and editors who make poll-based stories or analyses to be as cautious as possible and to use comparative data, including as a tool for verification and avoiding potential errors.

3. "The media and the judiciary: friends or enemies?"

This topic was selected against the background of the increasing number of news in the media about the apprehension or arrest of different people or about court trials. The goal of the facilitator Ana Racu was to talk to the media consumers about how correct are journalists in covering such events; what the public understand, and what the representatives of the judiciary would like to see from the media. Journalists; media users; as well as government officials; lawyers; the Deputy-Minister of Justice; staff of the Supreme Court of Justice, the Broadcast Coordinating Council; specialists in communication, psychology; bloggers, and representatives of specialized NGOs took part in the debate. The users had a constructive discussion, facilitated by Ana Racu in a balanced way, made reference to the relevant legislation in the area and made proposals that would contribute to strengthening the dialogue between the media and the judiciary. Their conclusions indicated that one of the problems is the lack of the skills and knowledge required for a professional dialogue

both among the journalists and among the representatives of the judiciary. Another issue according to the participants in the debate is the lack of proper training of the communication units of the judiciary and their capacity to overcome communication crises.

In her final report, the facilitator made some conclusions and recommendations. One of them refers to the need for the media organizations to develop a project with activities to help improve the dialogue between the judiciary and the media. In addition, Ana Racu considers that it is crucial to develop methodologic recommendations for the judges, lawyers and other staff of the law enforcement bodies for communication with the media, as well as guidelines for legal terms, relevant legal proceedings for journalists. Other suggestions were to conduct an analysis of the legislation that hinders access to relevant information from the law enforcement bodies; review the legal and regulatory framework that regulates the activity of the communication units from the law enforcement bodies and develop proposals for enhancing the activity of such units. The facilitator has also proposed organizing periodic meetings or a press club with invitees from both professions, in which topical subjects related to the communication between the media and the justice could be debated; conducting periodic meetings on the initiative of the Independent Press Association or the Press Council with the spokespersons and the staff of communication units of the law enforcement institutions (the judiciary, the penitentiary system, the prosecutor's office, the lawyers' union, NAC, Mol, etc.).

4. "Who are the experts invited on TV and how much does their opinion count?"

This topic proposed by the Content Manager was accepted by facilitator Ana Racu as being topical and necessary. Media users were invited to express their opinions about the commentators they see in the debate television programs. Journalists started a polemic on the topic "who may get the title of 'expert' and how", and media consumers joined the discussion. Some participants brought examples from freeing countries, where only individuals with proper training and extensive experience in a specific area have the conventional right to comment publicly on a subject. The issues addressed were different, including the gender equality on the stage of TV shows; the value of the messages delivered by the commentators on different topics, which are most often inviting pseudo-experts to comment different events or phenomena seriously damages the credibility of the media institution and deters consumers from watching such programs.

In the final report, Ana Racu recommended the program production teams to create databases of experts that would include people with various experience, and ensure that the presence thereof is representative of the subject addressed; create a

database of foreign experts and representatives of international organizations, who could be invited in the programs; leverage the expertise of the people who used to hold positions or perform actions, studies, and research relevant for the field under discussion, who could share opinions and more objective information.

5. “Do journalists have the right to protest or do they lose credibility if they do so?”

The debate was conducted at a time when mass protests of the Dignity and Truth Platform were organized constantly in Chisinau, and many journalists or media managers appeared before the protesters. Therefore, there was a need to discuss this subject to get aware of the consumers’ opinion about such involvement of journalists. An experienced journalist, Adrian Petcu, who has witnessed different periods marked by protests during his career, was invited as a facilitator. Mr. Petcu is an editor-in-chief of the Radio Moldova public station News Department. The significant number of comments – 33 – shows that the topic was of real interest to the consumers. Most of them considered that journalists have the right to express their civic position outside the working hours, since they are also part of the society. The facilitator concluded that some of the opinions pointed at the issue of poor awareness (or lack of it) about the rights and obligations of a journalist and proposed developing methodological recommendation for journalism teachers at universities, in order to help practical implementation of the provisions of the Journalist’s Code of Ethics; considering the punishment of both the journalists who violate the provisions of the Code of Ethics, and the institutions employing the latter (including the Broadcast Coordinating Council).

6. “Appointment of the new Prime Minister: how did different media outlets cover it? Which ones were manipulative?”

This debate was the first one held following the renaming of the section “Mediacritica” into “Target the media!”. The civic activist Oleg Brega was selected as facilitator, and the subject discussed was one covered by the media at that time – the selection and appointment of the new Prime Minister of Moldova.

Regardless of the small number of comments, the debate reached its goal partly: consumers expressed freely their substantiated opinions about the activity of the media and the way it reflects certain subjects. One of the users said that the media is to be blamed for the “chaos happening in our country”, and that journalists publish non-veridical information and misinformation in exchange for big fees, and proposed conducting various actions in order to “identify and show publicly the manipulative and false news”. “A project needs to be launched online, in which specialists should be invited to analyse doubtful news and to say whether or not the news are fake or

violate other rules that should be observed by genuine journalists”, one of the consumers, Petru Anton, has written. In his opinion, this would help educate ordinary citizens to identify the fakes, and journalists will be much more careful if they know they are under scrutiny. The user mentioned he could provide support in developing an application for this purpose.

Another user conducted a real case study, bringing examples, with links, where he proved that the readers were provided distorted information, while one participant in the discussion said it is difficult to uncover manipulation, since not all consumers have analytical skills and they prefer to believe the media.

In his final report, the facilitator Oleg Brega concluded that journalists should be used to speaking openly about their own problems within professional clubs and roundtables, and to discussing about the state of the media, in order to get used to analysing their own activity and that of the institutions employing them, in the light of the law and the ethical rules. In addition, the facilitator proposed conducting some actions to encourage interaction of journalists with the consumers of their products.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the analysis of the comments in each debate, moderators made the following recommendations:

- Journalists should analyse critically the results of the opinion polls; when they write articles or news, they should compare and cross-check such results with other data, in order to avoid errors and misinformation;
- Develop a project with activities aimed at improving the dialogue between the judiciary and the media ;
- Develop methodologic recommendations for the judges, lawyers and other staff of the law enforcement bodies for communication with the media, as well as guidelines for legal terms, relevant legal proceedings for journalists;
- Review the legislation hindering access to relevant information from the law enforcement institutions;
- Review the regulatory and normative framework regulating the activity of the communication units within the law enforcement institutions and develop proposals to improve their activity;
- Organize periodic meetings or a press club with invitees from the judiciary and the journalism, in which topical subjects related to the communication between the media and the justice could be debated;
- Conducting periodic meetings on the initiative of the Independent Press Association or the Press Council with the spokespersons and the staff of communication units of the law enforcement institutions (the judiciary, the penitentiary system, the prosecutor’s office, the lawyers’ union, NAC, MoI, etc.);
- To program production teams it was recommended to create databases of experts that would include people with various experience and ensure that the presence thereof is representative of the subject addressed;

- Create a database of foreign experts and representatives of international organizations, who could be invited in the programs; leverage the expertise of the people who used to hold positions or perform actions, studies, and research relevant for the field under discussion, who could share opinions and more objective information.
- Consider enforcing punishments for both the journalists who violate the provisions of the Code of Ethics, and the institutions employing the latter (including the Broadcast Coordinating Council).
- Conducting some actions to encourage interaction of journalists with the consumers of their products;
- Perhaps develop online applications to help consumers identify fake media products or distorted news, which do not reflect the reality.