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**CASE STUDY: REPORTING ON MASS MURDERS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
“VLADISLAV RIBNIKAR”, MALO ORAŠJE AND DUBONA**

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Belgrade, April 2024.



***This report was published with the financial aid of the European Union and UNESCO.
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INTRODUCTION

On May 3 and 4, 2023, two mass murders took place in Serbia, which shocked and deeply shook the entire society. In two separate massacres, a total of 19 people were killed, including nine children under the age of 14, and another eighteen were wounded.

The atmosphere of fear, despair and disbelief due to an unprecedented tragedy was further fueled by sensationalist reporting, manipulation of information, misleading speculation, use of anonymous sources about the course of the investigation whose credibility cannot be verified, focusing of media coverage on the perpetrator, "leaking of information" about what perpetrators of crimes allegedly said after they were arrested, graphic depictions and detailed descriptions of crimes that further traumatized citizens.

Despite numerous warnings from experts that detailed descriptions of crimes can contribute to the repetition of crimes, part of the media completely ignored those warnings, as well as calls from journalist associations to respect the dignity of the victims and show compassion for their families.

In the media coverage of these crimes, both Laws and the Journalist's Code of Ethics were violated.

The articles of the Journalist's Code of Ethics that relate to the truthfulness of reporting, the responsibility of journalists, journalistic attention, the relationship with information sources and respect for privacy were violated. Additionally, the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Protection of Personal Data were also violated.

Elementary school "Vladislav Ribnikar"

Multiple murders at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Experimental Elementary School took place on May 3, in the morning hours, when a student of that school, a minor, perpetrator of the crime, killed nine students and a security guard and wounded five people.

Immediately after the crime, the police arrested the minor perpetrator, and the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade identified him as a thirteen-year-old, against whom no criminal charges can be filed according to the current Law on Juvenile Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles.

Immediately after the crime, while the parents still had no information about their children who were in class that morning at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school, journalists from almost all newsrooms were already in front of the school.

Traumatized students who were leaving school were stopped and interviewed and "microphones were pushed under the noses" of shocked parents who were waiting for their children. This behavior is incompatible with the ethical standards of good journalism.

Before the competent institutions announced the official data on the victims of the mass murder, the media widely speculated about the number of children killed. Such behavior of the media created panic among parents, but also within the general public.

The majority of newsrooms easily violated the limits of responsible journalistic behavior, according to which journalists are obliged to respect basic human rights, to respect and protect the rights and dignity of children and victims of crime, and to especially avoid speculation and the transmission of unverified information and attitudes in reporting on tragedies in which there are casualties.

According to the Code of Ethics, the journalist is obliged to show compassion and discretion in such situations. Instead, with sensationalist reporting, speculations about victims and those injured, the media contributed to inciting trauma, fear and suffering.

At a press conference later that day, on May 3, the head of the Police Department for the city of Belgrade, Veselin Milić, announced that the minor K.K. planned the murder for a month and showed a list with the names of the students of the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school, whom, as the police believed, he planned to kill.

The head of the Belgrade police then showed a sketch of the school, which contained the numbers of the classes attended by the school's students, which, as stated, "resembles a drawing from a video game."

The media that respected the Code of Ethics did not publish the list and did not make the names of the children available to the public. Many did. The list of children's names appeared in the printed editions of some media in the following days, indicating a lack of understanding of the dangers and seriousness of the consequences of printing such a list.

Afterwards, almost all the media conveyed the words of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, who disclosed private information about the minor, perpetrator of the crime and his family at a press conference.

Upon the warnings of the Press Council and journalist associations that, according to the Code, even when state authorities publish private information about perpetrators or victims, such as names or details that would make them recognizable to the public, the media must not transmit that information due to possible consequences for the victim or the perpetrator if their identity is revealed, the media did not react.

While warning the media, but also referring to the behavior of the officials, the representatives of the journalistic associations indicated the necessity of an investigation regarding these mistakes.

The responsibility of the president was never established, and in March of this year, the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection found that Milić respected the Constitution and the Law and did not reveal the identity of the children. The only culprits are the media, which made that list available to the public and thereby violated the Law on Public Information and the Media.

The motive of the crime is not yet known, but the media has been speculating about it since the very first day.

Dubona and Malo Orašje

The following day, May 4, 2023, in the village of Dubona in the municipality of Mladenovac (city of Belgrade) and in the neighboring village of Malo Orašje in the municipality of Smederevo, in the evening hours, U.B (21) killed nine people and wounded 13. The defendant was arrested the following day in the village Vinjište near Kragujevac.

Already the next day, most of the media reported in a similar way as they reported on the mass murder at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school. Sensational, violating the privacy and dignity of the victims and their families.

Mass murders of this kind have never happened in Serbia before. This is the first time that the perpetrator of the crime is a thirteen-year-old child and that the victims are children. It is clear that the journalists were faced with dilemmas. A special challenge was whether and how to convey information coming from official institutions, considering that their publication is a violation of the Serbian Journalist's Code of Ethics.

However, we should not forget that the responsibility for what was finally published on the pages of daily newspapers rests with the editors, who are in the editorial office. It is also clear, and this research will show it, that many newsrooms did not take care to respect the ethical norms of the profession. Despite numerous appeals from the Press Council, journalist associations, as well as organizations that deal with the protection of children, they consciously decided to violate the Code of Ethics, behaving irresponsibly, abusing sources, violating privacy, publishing day after day articles that directly disturb the families of the victims and the entire public.

The media in Serbia, the region and the world reported on the tragedies. When reporting on these two tragedies, the media in the region also violated the ethical codes of journalists.

It is important to remind that regarding the violation of the Code of Ethics in the reporting of two tragedies, "[Journalists Against Violence](#)", the [Journalists Association of Serbia](#) (JAS) and the [Independent Journalists Association of Serbia](#) (IJAS) reacted immediately.

[The Press Council](#), along with the organizations "Save the Children", "Center for Children's Rights", "Friends of the Children of Serbia" and "Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia", announced that most of the media had forgotten the elementary rules of reporting in situations involving great pain and shock.

"Of particular concern is the non-compliance with the provisions related to the protection of the rights, privacy and dignity of children and victims of crime, and the absolutely inadmissible interviewing of children, witnesses of crimes and the publication of the perpetrator's name or details that could make him recognizable in the public," the Press Council said in a statement.

The Press Council called on the media to immediately stop publishing the disturbing, frightening and often bizarre details of the violence, as well as to stop speculating about the reasons for the violence and the psychological profiles of the perpetrators, as this creates an atmosphere of fear and further traumatizes children.

Professional reporting, with full respect for the rights of all those affected by the tragedy, necessary so that children and adults, as well as the whole society, have the opportunity to face the trauma they experienced, and to stop the terrible escalation of violence we are witnessing, is underlined in the statement.

Two unrecorded tragedies in the history of Serbia were the dominant topic of media coverage in the following months of 2023, and remained an important topic a year later, and sensationalist reporting continues to disturb the public and raise tensions.

What lessons can we learn from media coverage of these two massacres about how to ensure ethical journalism in the public interest??

METHODOLOGY

This research is focused on print media coverage in the first month after the mass murders were committed.

The research included nine daily newspapers with national coverage, which are published in Serbia: Alo, Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir, Nova, Politika, Srpski telegraf and Večernje novosti.

The articles used for this analysis were submitted to the Press Council from the "Ebart" archive, and were grouped by the keywords "Vladislav Ribnikar", "Malo Orašje", "Dubona", "tragedy at Vračar" and "massacre in Mladenovac".

In the period from May 4 until June 3, 2023, nine print media in Serbia included in this analysis published a total of 2,113 pages of articles that contained these keywords.

Those pages in nine print media were in the following number: Alo - 215, Blic - 251, Danas - 281, Informer - 263, Kurir - 273, Nova - 180, Politika - 212, Srpski telegraf - 237 and Večernje novosti - 199 pages.


Two mass murders were reported by the media on the largest number of pages in printed editions on May 6, when nine daily newspapers reported on the tragic events on 161 pages, including Alo (25), Informer (24), Srpski telegraf (20), Kurir (18), Nova (17), Politika (16), Blic (15), Danas (13) and Večernje novosti (13).

Excluding May 21, a weekend day when six domestic print editions were published (which reported two mass murders on 23 pages), the fewest articles in the print media were published on July 1, 2023, when nine print editions dealt with this event in total 30 pages of which Danas (6), Nova (5), Politika (4), Blic (4), Alo (3), Večernje novosti (3), Informer (2), Srpski Telegraf (2) and Kurir (1).

Although all articles were examined in the research, violations of the Code and media coverage were considered in the first ten days of the tragedy - that is, in the period from May 4 to May 13 and in the last ten days of the monthly frame, from May 25 to June 3. A total of 1507 pages of reports on this topic.

This methodology was chosen precisely to compare whether the appeals of the Press Council, associations of journalists and organizations dealing with the protection of children, as well as competent institutions, had an impact on the change in media ethics when reporting on these two tragedies.

Also, only the articles that present reports on mass crimes in "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, Dubona and Malo Orašje were evaluated, while violations of the Code of Ethics were not evaluated in articles that refer to political consequences and effects, reporting from protests, the session of the Assembly of Serbia and similar events, the cause of which are precisely these two crimes.



In contrast to the first ten days of the two mass murders, in the last ten days, from May 25 to June 3, by far the largest number of published articles, the reason for which was this crime, refers to reactions of the government and the opposition, which the media reports on in accordance with their editorial policy. Those media reports were not evaluated.

The methodology for evaluating published articles is based on the current Serbian Code of Ethics. Each published article was analyzed and assessed as to whether it was written in accordance with the rules prescribed by the Code. Every violation of a specific point and chapter of the Code is recorded. This methodology is also applied in the work of the Complaints Commission of the Press Council, as well as in the monitoring that the Press Council has done so far.

VIOLATIONS OF THE CODE

Nine print media in Serbia reported on the front pages of newspapers about the mass murders in the Elementary School "Vladislav Ribnikar", Malo Orašje and Dubona. In most cases, the articles were published on two pages.

Those are dominant main articles published on two pages, with subtexts and interfiles. We evaluated those units as one media report, unless it is about another topic that was published in a similar context.

In the first ten days, articles about two mass murders were mostly published by the media on breaking news pages, while in the last ten days of the monthly frame, mostly in the sections of "crime chronicles".

In both observed periods, from May 4 to May 13 and from May 25 to June 3, 2023, a total of 1,011 violations of the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Serbia were recorded.

The most frequently violated chapter was the Responsibility of Journalists (427 times), followed by Journalistic attention (237 times) and Respect for Privacy (205).


First ten days

In the first ten days, in the period from May 4 to May 13, in nine printed editions, 197 media reports were observed, in which certain articles of the Code were violated a total of 870 times.

In that period, the most frequently violated chapters of the Code of Ethics were chapter IV - Responsibility of journalists - 374 times, V - Journalistic attention - 194 times, chapter VII - Respect for privacy - 182 times and VI - Attitude towards sources of information - 80 times.

The largest number of violations of the Code was recorded on May 4, the day after the mass murder at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School. On that day, nine print media violated the Code 172 times, in 33 published articles.

By publishing the information collected the previous day, on May 4, all daily newspapers in Serbia violated the Code of Ethics, namely: Alo - 36 times, Blic - 37 times, Danas - 2 times, Informer - 22 times, Kurir - 22 times, Nova - 10 times, Politika - 4 times, Srpski telegraf - 26 times and Večernje novosti - 13 times.



On that day - May 4, the provisions of the Code of Ethics regarding the chapter on Responsibility of Journalists - 69 times and Respect for Privacy - 42 times were most often violated.

A huge number of reports refer to conversations with terrified and traumatized children who ran out of school, as well as with parents who were waiting in front of the school, all in a state of shock, pain and indescribable trauma. Exploitation of minors and adults in such a tragic situation and sensitive emotional state is incompatible with ethical journalism.

On the front pages of daily newspapers in Serbia on May 4, the names of the victims, the name and surname and the photo of the perpetrator of the crime, photos of the arrest, photos of crying parents and children and headlines, were published, which clearly violate the Code of Ethics.

The front pages published the alleged statements of the perpetrator of the crime "He told them without a trace of excitement: I'm a psychopath" (Alo), "Kosta K: (13) I killed them all because I'm a psychopath" (Informer), "Monster boy: I don't regret it", they deserved it! (Srpski telegraf).

On May 4, 2023, Srpski telegraf and Večernje novosti published on their front pages a list with the names of children whom the perpetrator of the crime planned to kill. Publishing the identity of minors is prohibited not only by the Serbian Code of Ethics, but also by law.

It is clear how dangerous, harmful, disturbing and shocking this editorial decision is for children, parents and society as a whole.

In the following days, on the front pages, the media published unverified and inaccurate information, descriptions of crime scenes, speculated on motives, published quotes from children eyewitness, interviewed both children and parents in a state of shock.

It is important to keep in mind that the front pages are visible on the newsstands and that children can certainly reach them.

From May 25 to June 3

In the period from May 25 to June 3, the number of media reports dealing with direct reporting on these two crimes is smaller.

In the reviewed articles, 44 violations of the Code of Ethics and a total of 141 violations were recorded.

The most frequently violated chapters of the Code of Ethics in this period are: Responsibility of journalists, Respect for privacy, Attitude towards information sources and Journalistic attention.

In this period, the media published articles about the mass murder in the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, Malo Orašje and Dubona, mainly on the pages of the Society and Crime Chronicle sections.

On May 28, the daily Srpski telegraf published an addition with the title "All conspiracy theories about the monster", which deals with the media's reporting on the mass murder in the elementary school „Vladislav Ribnikar“.

After publishing some of this information as fact in earlier editions, the media now lists it as a conspiracy theory. Additionally, repeating them in full quotes again misleads readers. Violations of the Code are recorded on all 11 pages of the addition.

Without violations

There were also reports on two mass murders on sports pages, because the father of one of the murdered girls at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School is a well-known volleyball player and volleyball coach.

Journalists from all sports sections of nine daily newspapers in Serbia were guided by the Code of Ethics when reporting on this topic. Like their colleagues in other columns, they were pressed by deadlines and in shock from the tragedy that hit the entire society, but they did not commit a single violation of the Journalist's Code of Ethics.

They wrote about the family and the victim with due care, responsibly, with piety and respecting the personal pain and shock, dignity and privacy of the family.

Nine print media also have online editions. Analyzes and complaints received by the Press Council indicate that the Code of Ethics is more often violated in articles published on the Internet.

MAJOR CODE VIOLATIONS

The dominant majority of articles in which the Code of Ethics is violated do not have a signed author, that is, the authorship is attributed to the editorial staff of that daily newspaper. Also, when it comes to photographs of victims, it is almost impossible to determine who is the author of the photographs.

Although this was not explicitly prohibited by the previous one, according to the new Law on Public Information and Media, adopted at the end of October 2023, all articles and photos must have a signed author.

TRUTHFULNESS OF REPORTING

According to the Serbian Code of Ethics, it is the duty of journalists to report accurately, objectively, completely and in a timely manner on events of interest to the public, respecting the public's right to know the truth and adhering to the basic standards of the journalistic profession.

Also, it is the right of the media to have different editorial concepts, but it is the duty of journalists to make a clear distinction between the facts they convey, comments, assumptions and guesses.

The journalist is obliged to indicate the source of the information he/she is transmitting. Only in cases of necessity and exceptional situations of interest to the public, journalists can resort to anonymous sources.

In the analyzed media reports, the impressions of anonymous and unnamed sources, who allegedly spoke with the perpetrator of the crime, apart from disturbing and traumatizing the public and violating the dignity of the victims and their families, also contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories.

It is precisely these conspiracy theories, which originate from such "anonymous sources", that additionally victimize the victims' families and have a harmful effect on the entire society. Such reporting can influence public perception and can have an impact on access to justice for both victims and perpetrators of crime.

The media violated the Code of Ethics by publishing the alleged statements of a minor, perpetrator of the crime, for which there was no public interest. On the contrary.

The media also placed such content on the front pages, upsetting and traumatizing, above all, the families of the victimized children, spreading a harmful influence on the children, but also on the entire public.

We are talking about headlines like - "I don't regret it, they deserved it" (Srpski Telegraf, front page on May 4), "It wasn't difficult for me to kill them!" When I shot the guard, the fear disappeared, after that everything went easily, I killed them one by one", (Informer, front page - May 5) and others.

The Code of Ethics prohibits also the publication of true information, if it is confidential information. The exception to the publication of such information is only if the public interest outweighs the confidentiality of the data.

VIOLATIONS OF REPORTING TRUTHFULNESS

In the first ten days after the two mass crimes, truthful reporting was violated 36 times, and in the period from May 25 to June 3, 9 times.

When it comes to the media, the biggest violators of this provision were: Srpski telegraf (19), Informer (15) and Alo (9).

A huge number of unnamed sources "close to the investigation", "close to the prosecution", "close to the police", "familiar with the investigation", social workers etc. that appeared in the media, caused indignation in the public. Public appeals have been sent to the police to stop this practice of "providing information" to the media. As well as providing official information in a responsible manner.

State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior Željko Brkić told Insider TV that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) cannot take responsibility for leaking information on the day of the attack at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School in Belgrade, because they were not the only ones who intervened and had information about that case. "There is a whole chain of different entities that, by the nature of their jobs and interventions, could come into possession of some information," Brkić said.

He also underlined that the Ministry of Interior takes disciplinary measures when it finds abuse and reckless disposal of information.

Appeals

Only violations of the Code of Ethics are recorded here, which beyond any doubt can be subsumed under the provisions of the Code of Ethics on truthfulness of reporting. However, the exact number of news whose veracity is questionable would be clearly visible only on the basis of specific complaints from the Press Council regarding the media's coverage of these two mass murders. Due to skillful writing, it is often not possible to clearly determine in the article itself whether it is a violation of the truthfulness of reporting, i.e. fabrication, whether it is a matter of "leaking" information to the media from the police, prosecutor's office, social services or health institutions, or a journalist abuses ignorance of the source.

For example, the most recent complaint addressed to the Press Council (April 2024) against Srpski Telegraf, in which the complainant claims that the newspaper published a fabricated testimony of his son. The father points out in the appeal that his son was never questioned in the investigative procedure, nor did he "testify" anywhere, so the media could not get his alleged testimony. The paper published the boy's alleged testimony citing only an "informed source".

In addition to the violation of reporting truthfulness, this behavior of the media also entails violations of other provisions of the Code of Ethics. When it comes to reporting on crimes, any such speculation has a harmful effect on society as a whole, and a particularly harmful effect on children. Also, on the functioning of the rule of law.

RESPONSIBILITY OF JOURNALISTS

The results of this analysis indicate that in these two cases, the media put the interest of the newsroom to increase readership with sensationalist reporting before the interest of the public.

The sensationalism on the front pages in the articles did not stop even during the days of mourning from May 5 to May 7, which were declared by the Government of Serbia.

In the period from May 4 to May 13, the chapter of the Code of Ethics on the responsibility of journalists was violated 373 times, and in the period from May 25 to June 3, 53 times.

In total, the chapter of the Code of Ethics, which refers to the responsibility of journalists, was violated 427 times, and when it comes to the media, the highest number of violations was recorded in Srpski telegraf (109), Informer (80) and the newspaper Alo (72).

According to the Serbian Code of Ethics, a journalist is primarily responsible to his readers. This responsibility must not be subordinated to the interests of others, especially the interests of publishers, the government and other state authorities. A journalist must stand up to anyone who violates human rights or advocates any kind of discrimination.

According to the Serbian Code of Ethics, it is forbidden for a journalist to use inappropriate, disturbing, pornographic and any other content that may have a harmful effect on children.

Also, a journalist is obliged to respect and protect the rights and dignity of children, victims of crime, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

However, in reporting on these two crimes, apart from using sensationalist narratives, such as "bloody feast", "bloody campaign", "bloody event", "slaughter", "unremembered massacre" and

so on, the media published unnecessary and unacceptable descriptions of the crime, descriptions of the scenes, speculated and guessed about the motives of the crime.

From the first day, experts have warned that this type of reporting can be very harmful, because it not only further upsets the public, but can also lead to the glorification and even copying of crimes. Thus, for example, child psychiatrist Roberto Grujičić from the Institute of Mental Health, in an interview for Raskrikavanje, speaking about the impact of sensationalist reporting on the emotions and psyche of citizens, explained in detail that it can lead to re-traumatization for the victims, and panic for the audience, because sensationalism creates a sense of threatened security in the entire public, and causes "collective fear, anxiety, withdrawal".

However, those warnings had little impact on most media.

For example, the newspaper Informer in its May 4 issue quotes criminologist Marko Nicović (p. 8) who says, among other things, "In addition to the tragedy, the influence of the media, which in such situations describe the massacre in detail, is also dangerous. This is how you influence the consciousness of young people, which has yet to be formed, and then they want to be known at any cost".

Therefore, the newspaper Informer is aware of the harmfulness of such reporting. However, in the same issue of "Shot like in a video game" (p. 4-5), and in the publications in the following days, it rejects such a warning and describes the crimes in detail, violating several articles of the Code of Ethics.

Crime reconstruction appears in most media. The movements of both killers are described in detail. Again, referring to sources from the investigation, their every step is described, and even their supposed feelings at the time of committing the gruesome crimes. They call it the "map of death".

Along with the description of the crime, the newspaper Alo (p. 3) gives a description of the movement of the perpetrator, with a photo of the school and the "path" where he killed all the victims.

The Blic newspaper (p. 3) publishes the chronology, citing as "step 1, 2, 3, 4" the sequence of the crime. In "step 1" Blic writes that "at the door he got into an argument with the guard who tried to calm him down, but the latter starts kicking everyone around him, then pulls out a gun and shoots him in the head." The Blic newspaper describes the crime in detail on pages 4 and 5.

The newspaper Kurir (p. 2-3) under the headline "Boy planned the crime like in a video game" also describes the details of the crime to the readers. Meanwhile, Srpski telegraf (p. 2-3) publishes the "chronology" of the crime in 9 points, and also describes it in detail on that and the following pages. Večernje novosti (p. 2), referring to its source, also reconstructs the execution of the crime.

List

At a press conference on May 3, 2023, the Chief of Police of the Police Department of the City of Belgrade, Veselin Milić, disclosed to the public the list of children whom the minor perpetrator of the crime intended to kill and the alleged murder plan, i.e. the schedule of classrooms, made by the minor perpetrator of the crime. The next day, most printed media published that list and plan.

In an atmosphere of shock and tragedy, Večernje Novosti published an uncensored list of the names of the children whom the juvenile perpetrator planned to kill on their front and inside pages (page 3), describing it as a "list of students he planned to liquidate by class".

Srpski telegraf published the same list on the front and inside pages (pages 2 and 4) of the paper. In the following days, the Serbian telegraph published a list with the names of the children, including on the front page on the day of mourning - May 6, 2023.

The media never took responsibility for the decisions of the editors to publish the lists of names of minors and to make them clearly visible and legible. They neither explained nor justified them, nor apologized to the families of the victims and survivors.

The dailies Alo (p. 2), Blic (p. 4) and Informer (p. 3) published the list of children whom the juvenile killer intended to kill with blurred names.

The Informer (p. 3) publishes a description of the "school break-in plan made by Kosta" with the signature "crime plan". "Criminal plan: Schedule of classrooms and classes that were targeted by the attackers", also publishes Kurir (p. 3).

The newspaper Nova published (p. 4) that plan without a signature, but the article quotes the words of the head of the Police Department for the city of Belgrade, Veselin Milić: "The sketch looks like something from a video game or a horror movie, which indicates that he thought out in detail how to get into school and in what number whom to kill from classes VII-2, VII-3, VII-4". Class numbers are clearly visible on every posted image.

According to the Code of Ethics, it is absolutely inadmissible and there is no public interest for the media to publish a list of children that the accused minor allegedly planned to kill, even when the police make this information public.

The guidelines of the Code of Ethics are very clear when it comes to protecting the identity and privacy of victims, especially minors: Journalists must be aware of the power of the media and the possible consequences in the event of such identity disclosure. Even if the competent state authorities publish information that belongs to the domain of privacy, the media must not broadcast it. The mistake of the state authorities does not imply "permission" to violate the ethical code of the profession for the sake of the newsroom's interest in increasing readership through sensationalist reporting.

UNICEF states that the consequences of harmful reporting are inspiring imitators who see the perpetrator as a role model or hero, further traumatizing survivors, families and local communities.

Social media

Shortly after the first crime, gruesome videos glorifying the juvenile perpetrator appeared on social media. The authors of those recordings are mostly children.

Reporting on this topic is of public interest, but only if it is in accordance with the Serbian Code of Ethics.

Reporting unprofessionally, i.e. relaying word for word what those minors said about the victims, and we are talking about gruesome insults, the publication of which is a direct violation of the provisions on ethics,

public speech and the dignity of the victim, and by terrifyingly supporting the perpetrator of the crime, the media violated several articles of the Code of Ethics.

And, above all, they showed no respect for the victims and their families.

The media also integrally published messages of support for the killer, and a shocking video of a minor girl glorifying the killer was broadcast in its entirety in some media.

For example, Alo quotes a girl in its edition of May 6, and Blic even publishes the headline "He will come out, but they will never come out of the casket" on May 8. In the article "The virus of evil is spreading", the Srpski telegraf in the edition of May 5 publishes messages glorifying the killer taken from social networks, as well as a picture of a boy holding a gun.

These are just some of the examples. The gruesome quotes in this analysis were not reported, first of all, out of respect for the dignity of the victims and their families.

Speculations

Outside of any public interest, from the first day of the crime at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, the media published speculations about the motives of the crime. By publishing unfounded speculations, the media entered the dangerous zone of unconscious "understanding" of crimes, thereby further victimizing the victims, causing additional shock and pain to their families as well.

Some examples of speculation are:

The newspaper Alo (May 4, p. 2) speculates with the headline: "The killer was a victim of peer violence."

The Blic newspaper (May 4, p. 3) writes: "as claimed by some students who know the crazed teenager, the 'trigger' was supposedly an 'F' from history, although that thesis was later refuted."

The newspaper Kurir (May 4, p. 6) in the article "Mystery of the motive" quotes both a parent and an unnamed student, who speculate about both previous motives.

Newspaper Nova (May 4, p. 2), referring to the statement of the Minister of Education Branko Ružić, writes that the perpetrator of the crime "was a victim of peer violence." Under the title "An excellent student, quiet and withdrawn" (May 4, p. 3), Nova states that "The whole bloody feast started precisely because of his anger towards the history teacher, whom he injured."

Funerals

Contrary to the Serbian Code of Ethics and the spirit of compassion, while reporting from the funerals of murdered children and young people, the majority of the media showed recklessness, trampled on the dignity of families and resorted to sensationalism.

Reporting on funerals is not in the public interest.

Apart from the daily newspaper Politika, on all front pages on May 7 (this is the Sunday when Alo, Blic, Kurir, Večernje novosti, Politika and Srpski telegraf were published) photos were published

from the funerals of the children killed in the school "Vladislav Ribnikar" and Malo Orašje, which include photos of crying and grief-stricken parents, relatives and friends. The media cited the wailing of mothers, the statements of friends and neighbors.

On the front pages: "Howls on St. George's Day" (Alo), "Resist evil" (Blic), "We must not be silent before evil" (Kurir), "The blackest St. George's Day" (Večerenje novosti), "Our angels flew to heaven" (Srpski telegraf), while Politika publishes "The last goodbye to the victims in Belgrade and Malo Orašje" on the fourth page.

Newspaper Danas and Nova did not report from the funerals.

Reporting on funerals has become a terrible "rule" of journalistic tabloid practice in Serbia, especially when the victims are children and young people.

The attitude towards the victims and their families, when the media photograph them in the most vulnerable and tragic moments of their lives, and ask for a "newspaper statement" from grieving relatives and friends, goes beyond unprofessional journalism and enters the domain of disrespecting basic human values.

The proposal of the new Serbian Code of Ethics, which at the time of writing this report is under public discussion, introduces a new chapter - Respect for dignity and point 5, according to which "Journalist shall not report on funerals, except in the case of high-profile public figures".

Experts

On the occasion of the massive violation of the Code when reporting on two mass crimes in Serbia, the Press Council and the organizations "Save the Children", "Center for Children's Rights", "Friends of Children of Serbia" and "Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia" called on the media to report more on ways to protect psychological health and to give space to experts who will speak in a constructive and comprehensible way about dealing with trauma and how to deal with and talk to children exposed to trauma.

Under the title "How to understand a child's crime", the daily Politika published an interview with school psychologist Marina Nadejin on May 4 (p. 8), and the article also mentions the phenomenon called the "Werther effect" in psychology, "named after the great the number of suicides of young people, which occurred after the publication of the book "The Sorrows of Young Werther", in which Johann Wolfgang Goethe writes about the unhappy love of a young man, his escape from the narrow environment and the feeling of being lost".

The next day, Politika also published an interview with psychologist Biljana Lajović, and the newspaper continued to report in that tone in the following days.

Unfortunately, the media published a large number of articles in which psychologists indulged in speculations about the mental health of the perpetrators of crimes, their motives and finding the "culprit". An example of this is the publication of speculations in the first days of reporting that the killer, minor, was a victim of peer violence, and some experts commented on such a thesis as if it were a fact.

Even experts of great reputation in the public have engaged in such evaluations.

The chapter on the responsibility of journalists of the Code of Ethics includes point 3, which states that a journalist is obliged to respect the rule of presumption of innocence and must not declare anyone guilty until a court verdict is pronounced. The media are obliged to respect the right to be presumed innocent and to protect the privacy and identity of the suspect or perpetrator, even in the event of an admission of guilt.

Even in the case of an admission of guilt, the media is obliged to report with due care.

JOURNALISTIC ATTENTION

The Code of Ethics is clear that a journalist is obliged to approach work with due professional care.

When it comes to this provision, almost all the articles included in this analysis violated this provision of the Code. In the articles published in the period from May 4 to May 13, the journalist's obligation to approach work with journalistic attention was violated 194 times, and in the period from May 25 to June 3 – 43 times. A total of 237 times, the chapter of the Code of Ethics on Journalistic attention was violated.

RELATION TOWARDS SOURCES OF INFORMATION

According to the Serbian Code of Ethics, a journalist must never abuse other people's emotions, their ignorance or lack of judgment.

Citizens, that is, the sources of information with whom the journalist talks, are not always aware of the power of the media and the consequences that their statements can have on them personally, as well as on the people they are talking about. Conscious abuse is incompatible with the journalistic profession, but also carelessness, the possible consequence of which would be abuse of the interlocutor.

Also, according to the Code of Ethics, as a rule, minors can be interviewed only in the presence or with the consent of their parents or guardians. Photography and recording of children is prohibited.

In reporting on two mass murders, the media violated the provisions of the Code relating to the relationship with information sources 85 times.

In the period from May 4 to May 13, these provisions were violated 80 times, and in the period from May 25 to June 3, 6 times.

Conversations with the children

Violating both the Law on Public Information and the Media and the Code of Ethics and the UNICEF guidelines for reporting on children, the media did not respect their privacy or dignity, nor did they appreciate the tragic and traumatic moment in which the children found themselves.

Journalists tried to interview the children who left the "Vladislav Ribnikar" school, traumatized and crying, asked questions without the presence of their parents, and then published their statements in that state in the media.

The next day, May 4, "He came and pointed a gun at us," Blic announces on the front page, and then on the third page it reports the statement of a boy, a witness to the crime, for that newspaper, whom they say was in a state of shock.

The tragedy in Vračar shook everyone, and the students of this school told Kurir "after the massacre that the scene was gruesome", that newspaper published on the third page, on May 4, as well as a quote from the girl adding that "she is a student who, during the massacre met the murderer face to face and described the horror she saw".

The newspaper Alo publishes (p. 4-5) a quote from a boy who, as it says, "managed to avoid the massacre even though he was on the kill list created by the K.K."

The newspaper Informer reports the words of the girl "who went to class" with the juvenile offender. The newspaper Srpski telegraf quotes (p. 6) what students, eyewitnesses to the mass murder, told the newspaper's journalists.

Večernje Novosti newspaper, in an article entitled "Children are without words all in black and silence" from May 5, while reporting on the citizens who came to light candles and lay flowers in front of the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, writes that their reporters asked three schoolgirls (giving their first names, without surnames) and a friend of one of the murdered girls, whether they knew the juvenile killer:

"White hands tremble for the innocence of childhood. - Did you know Kosta? - we ask. - I... I did - he only answers..."Večernje novosti wrote.

A description of the behavior of the media is provided by the newspaper Danas in the issue of May 4.

"A minor incident occurred when a television cameraman set up a camera to record a crying girl, who had traces of blood on her white sweater. "Come on, man, don't film the children. Where is your empathy?", that girl's teacher asked him. The cameraman put the camera away", published Danas.

Conversations with adults in a state of shock

Reporting on the mass murder at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, the media published the testimonies of family members as they tried in panic and indescribable fear to find out what happened to their children in front of the school and hospital.

The media published the sentences of parents, grandparents and descriptions of how they looked when they found out that their child had passed away.

When reporting on the mass murder in Malo Orašje, the media, conveying the statements of the locals, abused the emotions of the grieving family members, parents, and relatives in the most brutal way, who spoke in a state of indescribable pain and shock.

Both journalists and editors were aware that these people were in a state of severe trauma after a terrible tragedy and in an extremely vulnerable emotional state.

Even in a situation where family members did not want to talk to journalists, some media mentioned that detail in the articles. When they could not talk to family members, the media abused their neighbors' emotions.

It should be remembered that the tragedy had just happened and that the family members were in a state of shock and terrible trauma and that the pain was still very fresh. In the spirit of the Code of Ethics, a journalist must never abuse the emotions of others, especially the families of victims who are also victims of crime.

The families should have been given time, and after that, interviews and conversations with them, with good journalistic intent and respect for the Code of Ethics, can be useful for the whole society.

RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

According to the Code of Ethics, journalists respect the privacy, dignity and integrity of the people they write about. When reporting on accidents and crimes, it is not allowed to publish names and photos of victims and perpetrators that clearly identify them. Also, it is not allowed to publish any data that can reveal the identity of either the victim or the perpetrator, before the competent authority officially announces it.

A journalist must be aware of the power of the media, that is, of the possible consequences for the victim or perpetrator if their identity is revealed. In particular, it must take into account the severity of possible consequences in the event of a possible error/wrong assumption in reporting.

Even if the competent state authorities publish information that falls within the domain of the perpetrator's or victim's privacy, the media must not transmit that information.

Journalists and editors should especially avoid speculation and transmission of insufficiently verifiable statements when reporting on accidents and tragedies in which there are casualties or material and other interests of citizens are severely affected.

According to the Code of Ethics, when reporting on events involving personal pain and shock, the journalist is obliged to adjust his questions to reflect the spirit of compassion and discretion.

The journalist is obliged to ensure that the child is not endangered or exposed to risk due to the publication of his/hers name, photo or video with his face, house, community in which he lives or recognizable surroundings.

Information obtained from doctors, social workers, educators, which directly or indirectly refers to the identity of minors may not be published.

Aware of the situation, in this analysis we have narrowed down the evaluation of respect for privacy primarily to minors. Despite this, the media massively violated this provision.

In reporting on two mass murders in the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, Malo Orašje and Dubona, the media violated the provisions of the Code relating to respect for privacy a total of 205 times. In the period from May 4 to May 13, 182, and in the period from May 25 to June 3, 23 times.

Photographs

From the front pages to the inside pages, the media published photos of victims and perpetrators of crimes, their full names and surnames. Some media tried to hide their identities, while others did not.

That's how the photos of the victims found their way onto the front pages of daily newspapers, even when it comes to minors. Almost all photographs of minor victims are unsigned, which raises the question of how the media got them.

Publishing photos like this has also led to dangerous mistakes. Večernje novosti published photos of crime victims in the edition of May 5, including a photo of a wrong child. As they stated in the apology in the printed edition the next day (p.10), "a picture of a girl was published, who, fortunately, was not killed in the massacre, and which someone posted with the other students and shared on social networks".

The International Fund for Children and Youth pointed out that the media should not put the picture of the perpetrator next to the picture of his victim, nor should they publish too much of the picture of the perpetrator, especially in subsequent stories. The exception, they say, would only be in the case when the police are still looking for the perpetrator or the victims.

The media also violated this recommendation.

When reporting on two mass murders, almost all front pages published photos of children. It also constitutes a breach of privacy and a violation of the Code of Ethics.

Reporting on details from medical files

In an address to the media, the Minister of Health, Danica Grujičić, and other doctors gave information about the state of health of the wounded. Although it was not recorded that they violated the right to privacy by communicating their names and surnames to the media, it was not in the interest of the public to know in the smallest details what kind of interventions the doctors undertook.

Many media understood this and reported the most general information about the health condition of the wounded. However, it should be kept in mind that such reporting implies the whole editorial insight into that day's reporting. Regardless of the fact that the name of the injured person will not be revealed in the health report, the editor must make sure that the injured person is not recognizable on other pages and in other articles, that is, to protect his privacy.

CONCLUSIONS

The reporting of two mass murders in the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School, Malo Orašje and Dubona, can be described as the dominance of unethical, unprofessional, low-quality reporting with a lack of empathy.

It would be in the public interest for the media to point out the possible causes of tragic events in order to prevent similar tragedies in the future, and to request solutions to help families.

Again, when it comes to the public interest, it would be reporting that would help the entire society recover from these two gruesome tragedies, but this type of editorial approach is not found in the print media in Serbia, which boasts the largest circulations. There is very little reporting like this, but it should be more visible and dominant.

The difference in media reporting could be solely explained by the difference in the editorial policy of the media, however, it is noticeable that the media that have sector-educated journalists, such as Politika and Danas, did not make the most hideous violations of the Code of Ethics.

One of the main problems is the "leakage of information" from institutions, often information that is not of any public interest, and which is unverifiable and further disturbs the public.

It is important to point out that in none of the newsrooms of the observed print media did the journalists of the sports section violate the Code of Ethics by reporting on two mass murders.

It is noticeable that the media dealt much more with the tragedy in the Elementary School "Vladislav Ribnikar", than the murders in Malo Orašje and Dubona. Also, most of the articles that deal with juvenile killers focus on him. According to experts, such reporting is extremely harmful and only contributes to the re-traumatization of survivors, victims' families and the entire society.


RECOMMENDATIONS

Mass murders are a tragedy that affects the entire society. The media must be aware of this and do everything in their power not to incite further fear, panic and anxiety towards citizens. First of all, they must take care of the humane attitude towards the victims and their families.

Journalists must report with due diligence, without sensationalism, respecting the dignity of children, victims and their families in accordance with the Serbian Code of Ethics. For such work, they must have the support of the editor.

Disturbing content should never appear on the front pages.

Journalists must not indulge in speculations about the motives and causes of crimes, not encourage and spread misinformation and not induce interlocutors to do so. The media must explain using facts and verified information.



When speaking with interlocutors and using photographs, journalists must do so in accordance with the Code of Ethics.

Transferring content from social networks or other media does not exclude the responsibility of journalists and editors. The media must be aware and take care that in this way they are also violating the Code of Ethics, as well as the law.

The media must consult experts who will help them report responsibly on mass murders.

The media should turn to reporting that will reassure the public and give advice and guidance to citizens on how to ask for help.

When reporting on mass murders, the media must not focus on the perpetrator of the crime. The focus of the media when reporting on mass murders, and in accordance with the time distance, piety and special sensitivity, should be on the stories of the victims and their families.

Competent institutions should do everything in their power to stop the "leakage of information", whether it is the police, prosecutor's office, health or social welfare institutions, and especially when it comes to data related to children.

It is necessary for the Press Council to receive support to organize training on how the media should report on such great tragedies. That support should be continuous.

