



Cumulative Report on Debates in the “Professional Development” section on the MediaForum Platform

Period: March 25 2015 – 1 March 2016

Overview

During March 25, 2015 – March 1, 2016, 9 debates were conducted in the “Professional Development” section. The topics have been selected based on the issues related to the performance of the journalist profession, raised by media professionals within meetings, discussion clubs, or even on Facebook, as well as in private discussions. The subjects related to collection and dissemination of information or to issues that occurred in the current activity of the media and have been proposed by the Content Manager of the platform or by the facilitators, and agreed with the Project Director.

Topics and debate process

1. “Design quality of news websites in Moldova”

This topic by which the platform was kicked off, was selected out of several topics suggested. It was given priority taking into account the fact that it is topical and necessary for journalists, given the significant increase in the number of websites, including news sites in Moldova, as well as the observations of professionals about the fact that not all journalistic content on the websites is properly ‘packed’ and presented. We have also selected this topic because all media outlets have created web platforms in the past years. Dumitru Ciorici agreed to facilitate the debates and suggested examples and explicit resources/recommendations from the experience of foreign media.

Web designers and journalists who write primarily for the web took part in the discussion. They agreed that most Moldovan websites have a chaotic structure and are not sufficiently adapted for different devices, such as smartphone, or tablet.

Others disapproved of the excessive advertising that disturbs and chases users, or spoke about the fact that pages are not sufficiently “aired”, in other words, there is no sufficient free space between the text, images or other elements, which would allow the content to appear elegantly packed and easily readable. Some users have brought print screen examples of improper design or pages with too much advertising.

In his final report about the debate, the facilitator included a number of conclusions and recommendations useful to journalists, such as using maximum three colours in designing news websites, and making them user-friendly, i.e. adaptable to different type of screens; as well as limiting the number of banners to maximum 3 on one page.

2. “Social media: an enemy or an ally of the journalists?”

The increasing number of news stories prepared based on Facebook posts of public persons or by taking over photos or information from social media without verifying it, has dictated the selection of this topic for discussions. The facilitator and Content Manager agreed from the very beginning that this is a topical subject both for the journalists who have made a habit of taking over opinions or photos from Facebook without any effort, and for the persons who have become subject of news due to social media posts.

The discussion turned to be of major interest, taking into account the various opinions expressed by journalists. Some said that Facebook posts often become sources of information for investigative journalists, and there have been such examples in the past two years (the case of the luxury displayed by prosecutor Elena Neaga). Others also agreed that appearance on Facebook helps employees or politicians hide from a direct confrontation with the media – they post statements and avoid appearing before the media and answering questions that would disadvantage them. It has also been underscored that taking over Facebook posts without verification and obtaining a reply, lowers the quality of journalistic products.

The facilitator recommended using social media as an additional source for documentation and made reference to the Code of Ethics and the journalistic norms that require verification of information.

3. “Visual content on websites. How important is it and how should we use it”?

The topic was actually a continuation of the subject opened on the launch of the platform, facilitated by Dumitru Ciorici. The intention here was to draw journalists’ attention on the way they illustrate their stories, including the use of symbol-images, the quality of photos, and manipulation or misleading through images. The facilitator attached to the debate two guidelines used by the foreign media, on the use of

images, as a resource for professionals; one guideline developed by Reporters Without Borders, and the other – by Reuters. The discussion had a smaller number of participants; however the opinions expressed contained useful recommendations for journalists. For instance, a journalist who specialised in the last years in creating infographics, recommended dividing the visual content by logo or other author signs, but displaying them in an “intelligent” way, that is in the same place and in areas that would not disturb the reader.

The facilitator made a number of recommendations within the discussion. Making reference to the studies in this field, he recommended that the videos on the websites should not be longer than 3-5 minutes and start as soon as the user clicks them, rather than having to wait until they are loaded, since there is a risk that the user would leave the page. In addition, to ensure the visibility of the Mediaforum platform and to ensure sharing of journalists’ experience and opinions to a bigger number of professionals, Dumitru Ciorici suggested making some news stories about “the answers provided by journalists on the X subject”.

4. “Deliberate leak of information. How could we manages such situations”?

Cases when journalists take over and disseminate apparently worthy and exclusive information, which are in fact posted deliberately by people or interest groups, are increasingly frequent in Moldova; this why, Deutsche Welle’s journalist, Vitalie Calugareanu, accepted and welcomed the Content Manager’s suggestion to discuss this topic. The goal of this debate was to discuss this issue among journalists and to give a helping hand to young professionals who are increasingly often used as “sounding boards”, the facilitator explained in the final report.

Experienced journalists participated in the discussion, as well as a university teacher, and the overall conclusion drawn by the facilitator was that too little attention is paid to “such tricks, which have a significant influence on people’s conscience”. Another conclusion formulated by the facilitator was that the risk of deliberate leak of false or provocative information in the media is currently high, in the context of the military confrontations with Ukraine. Vitalie Calugareanu suggested organising some debates on this topic with the public at large “in order to reduce as much as possible the number of people who could be attracted to support a false idea as part of a hostile plan against the state”. The facilitator has also proposed introducing a special course at the journalism department “on topics similar to the ones addressed in the MediaForum, which would be interesting and useful”. Vitalie Calugareanu highlighted the urgent need to expel from this profession journalists who use manipulating and propaganda means and serve some interest groups, although he acknowledged that so far there is no such mechanism.

5. **“Should journalists be specialised by areas in a media outlet”?**

Appearance in the media of poorly documented materials, in which approximate data are used, which misleads consumers, along with the relative “universality” of the reporters, has made the need for journalists’ specialisation by areas a recurring topic. The biggest share of participants in the discussion agreed that this would be beneficial for the quality of journalism products, however, they noted that the existing media outlets cannot afford such a practice, and therefore they are trying to educate reporters “good at everything”, and if they still assign reporters responsible for specific areas, this is just in order to maintain a permanent relationship with the government institutions. There have also been opinions that journalists should have the skills to write about any topic.

The facilitator has suggested holding periodic discussions on this topic with the journalists and publishers to explain particularly to publishers that “the success of a media business and the quality of the product delivered depends upon journalists’ specialisation”. In addition, Vitalie Calugareanu suggested that students who do their internship in media outlets should undergo a specialisation, so that when they graduate, it is easier for them to find an area or a media outlet. Another suggestion was to launch a pilot project and conduct some practical demonstrations, perhaps through case studies, to look at how a “general practitioner” journalists covered a specific subject, and how the same subject was covered by a journalist specialised in that area.

6. **“Trap-titles: do they attract or do they chase away readers”?**

Luring readers through as flashy headlines as possible – the new trend in the online media of Moldova – this subject had been put on the MediaForumului agenda long ago and was proposed to facilitator Anastasia Nani, who has good working experience, particularly in the online media. Most of the participants in the discussion criticized this practice as being one that conceals the lack of substance in the news, and agreed that this is just a temporary phenomenon. In addition, users said that by using this kind of tricks, media outlets do not have long-term benefits, in addition, they might violate ethical rules. The facilitator brought examples from the Moldovan media, as well as the opinion of professionals on this topic. She quoted, for instance, an article signed by Andrei Plesu, who said that this is a form of manipulation of the reader.

In conclusion, the facilitator recommended organising some trainings for publishers and editors focused on the language of headlines, as well as some roundtables for journalists.

7. “How long will journalists continue to steal from journalists”?

Plagiarism, or more recently, dishonest takeover of texts, is another growing issue in Moldova, given the increasing number of news sites. In many cases, such takeovers may be qualified as theft; this is why Anastasia Nani offered to facilitate a debate on this topic. The opinions were quite diverse; every journalist had at least one case to share related to plagiarism. A website owner came up with technical solutions and an “economic” approach to the issue. Everyone agreed that this phenomenon will never disappear totally, however they proposed viable solutions for different cases: discussions with the copycats, court trials, content protection by limiting the volume of text, which may be taken over, etc.

The facilitator recommended getting involved the institutions that could regulate such situations, including the Media Council, and training reporters and publishers on the correct rules for quoting and taking over content produced by other journalists.

8. “Communication and communicators. Again about cooperation with press services”

The rules for providing information of public interest vs. the reality existing in Moldova. Facilitator Adrian Petcu challenged into a discussion both the journalists and the people responsible for press relations from public institutions. Through this debate, we intended to find out what are the current expectations of journalists from the press services and vice-versa. This discussion was among the most successful on the MediaForum, as it has gathered a big number of comments – 27. Communicators got involved and pointed out the cornerstones in their work with journalists, and the latter gave examples of specific situations and talked about issues arising within the relationship with press services.

Facilitator Adrian Petcu noted in his final report the need to create a more or less institutionalised link between public institutions and journalists. This could take the form of a discussion club with constant meetings, in which various news situations arising in the daily activity of communicators and the media could be discussed. In addition, he recommended the press service representatives to consult from time to time the guidelines on proper communication, in order to increase the efficiency of their work and to enhance implicitly the image of the institution they represent.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Taking into account the scale of the discussions and the diversity of opinions, the main recommendations made by the facilitators in the “Professional Development” section relate to organising actions to complement the discussions on the MediaForum:

- Encourage journalists, through various actions, to constantly enhance their knowledge in terms of presenting the visual content on websites in order to be successful online;
- Encourage journalists to observe the Code of Ethics when taking over information from social media;
- Publish the most constructive and useful opinions expressed by professionals on the MediaForum, in different forms (ex: as news);
- Conduct some classes at the Journalism and Communication Science department focusing on the topics discussed within the MediaForum, taking into account that they reflect the current state of things in the Moldovan media;
- Identify some mechanisms to penalise journalists who accept knowingly to act as instruments for misinformation and manipulation in the hands of some groups of interest or even parties;
- Discuss with publishers, from time to time, about the specialisation of journalists by areas;
- Launch a pilot-project on studying of a specific field by journalists;
- Organize trainings for publishers and editors on editing headlines;
- Conduct a campaign against plagiarism and get the Media Council actively involved by taking a stance in cases where it is found that texts have been taken over from journalists, by violating the rules on quotations;
- Set up a discussion club between the communicators of public institutions and journalists, in order to establish a dialogue to facilitate the work of both professions.