

Analysis of the media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Serbia

Analysis of the content of daily press and TV stations as of
26 February through 6 May 2020

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Introduction

On 12 January 2020, the World Health Organisation confirmed that the cause of respiratory infection observed with certain group of patients in Wuhan, a city in the Chinese Province of Hubei, was a new coronavirus (later named Covid-19), whose global spreading was proclaimed a world pandemic on 11 March 2020. In the course of the first media conference organised in Serbia on 26 February 2020 due to rapid spreading of the virus throughout the European countries, which was attended by the highest state officials, the speech of a doctor Branimir Nestorović was specifically observed, when he named this virus “the funniest virus in the history” and called upon all women to travel freely to Italy, because despite a large number of infected people in this country at that point of time, they would “be protected by oestrogen”. However, after the registration of the first coronavirus case in Serbia on 6 March, the official addresses in this regard drastically changed, as well as the position of the State vis- à-vis pandemic, and the state of emergency was proclaimed on 15 March, and it lasted until 6 May 2020.

The importance of the media outlets in shaping and experiencing of the reality specifically increases in the times of crisis. Comprehensive, timely and accurate informing of citizens during a health-related crisis represents a key in the public information, which in line with the publicly available information adapts to new life circumstances, while on the other hand, the professional work of the media outlets more than ever sheds the light on those who are competent to, on behalf of citizens, make decisions of importance for the whole population. However, panic spreading in the public, speculations, misinformation, incomplete and uninformed information may cause a series of adverse effects, intensify crisis and cause - “infodemia”, which under the circumstances of technologically based rapid and almost unlimited dissemination of information represents a completely new crisis level. Under these circumstances, media outlets and journalism constitute a critical point in the public sphere, given that by setting a certain agenda and prioritizing certain issues, aspects and actors, as well as by specific approach to the problem, they build a framework wherein the general public addresses the most important pandemic-related issues. Despite the fact that the role of media outlets in the health crisis is perceived only as indirect compared to the role of the state or the medical profession, the public interest media orientation represents the foundation in crisis resolution, and democracy preservation in the crisis affected society.

Free flow of information, availability of relevant data and the possibility to freely interpret them constitute an indispensable prerequisite which enables the public interest information and the operation of media outlets. However, importance of free access to information has not been adequately recognised by the decision-makers, as best evidenced by the Decision of the Government of Serbia, dated 28 March, to adopt a Conclusion centralizing pandemic related information. Despite the fact that this Decision was swiftly withdrawn, it provoked tumultuous public reactions.

Specific relations between the state, political structures, the medical profession, other relevant actors and the media outlets defined conditions for the pandemic-related public information in the Republic of Serbia.

Methodology

Analysis of the content of six daily newspapers with different editorial policies - Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir, Politika and Večernje novosti and three TV stations - RTS, TV Pink and TV N1 conducted for the period from 26 February through 6 May 2020, i.e. from the first addresses of the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia to the public with regard to the coronavirus pandemic, until the state of emergency lifting.

The sample of the printed media accounts for 1609 articles (Blic 223, Danas 295, Informer 196, Kurir 270, Politika 365 and Večernje novosti 260), and these analysis units were collected from the front pages of the six mentioned newspapers, i.e. each text containing the key words *coronavirus*, *COVID-19*, *covid*, *pandemic*, *epidemic* and *state of emergency* was taken for the analysis, and was announced or published entirely on the front page. Texts chosen by the editorial team for the front page are the best reflection of the editorial policy of each newspaper, and these texts are also seen by the citizens who do not form these media outlets readership given that the front pages find their ways to them via different channels of communication (social networks, shop windows). Front pages hence depict editorial policies of each and every newspaper and therefore the texts are sampled in this way.

The sample of television station comprises public service broadcaster Radio Television Serbia, TV Pink, commercial media outlet with the national frequency and the cable channel TV N1. This sampling covered the broadest range of editorial policies, taking into account different availability of these media outlets and the profile of their audiences. The sample was made by selecting the first two features announced in the latest news within the central daily news programs (Dnevnik 2 RTS, Nacionalni dnevnik TV Pink and Dnevnik u 19 TV N1), and containing the

key words used when sampling the print media. The total of 376 features were sampled – 124 from RTS, 123 - TV Pink and 129 - TV N1.

When analysing the content, the following categories were observed:

- The topic and interpretative framework of reporting, related to the specific analysis unit, i.e. to the narrower thematic focus regarding the coronavirus and broader framework of the topic interpretation (medical, political, legal, media and everyday life framework); it was also noted whether the media outlet based its work on the facts or media interpretation did not correspond with the presented facts contained in the text or feature;
- Media coverage genres and forms used to observe journalists' approach (information, analytical, interviews, commentary and human stories);
- Type of source represented in the text/feature (for instance, official/state authority and institutions, unnamed source, healthcare workers, patients, opposition political actors), which indicated to the selection of the set of information that the analysis unit was based on, and presence of the source of coverage;
- Media outlet approach to the corona-related coverage, used for observing whether the focus was on the public information, i.e. whether the media outlet mediates the flow of information towards the public, problematizes different topics in the context of the pandemic or, on the other hand, the media work results in the pandemic politicisation, panic spreading, minimizing the gravity of the situation or in conflicts within the journalists' associations. It was also mapped whether media outlets targeted specific social groups or political entities as responsible for spreading and consequences of pandemic;
- Groups of actors present in the text/feature (three key actors per text) and relation of the media outlet towards them in terms of function (passive or active role) and value context. An actor, passivized in the text, was additionally assessed against whether s/he was just mentioned, criticized or praised by the other actors or media outlets. On the other hand, the value context set by the media outlet against the actor was assessed.

Research results – daily newspapers

Coverage topics and interpretative framework

The coronavirus and pandemic were not a standalone thematic unit in any of the analysed newspapers, they rather intertwined with the existing topics and column within every media outlets analysed. Therefore, this topic was adjusted to the structure of every newspaper and was evenly distributed accordingly. The pandemic-related information hence occurred in a wide range of topics and was interpreted in a variety of interpretative frameworks.

Thematic wise, media outlets mostly covered the situation in Serbia caused by the coronavirus epidemic and this thematic approach accounts for 17% of all texts. It is then followed by texts dealing with specific measures imposed by the state aimed at preserving the health of the population in the course of the analysed period (introduction of the state of emergency, curfew, restriction of movement, etc.), making a total of 15% of the text. The fight against coronavirus, i.e. the topic that covered the broadest approaches in the fight against coronavirus at the society level was observed in 12% of the texts. World news followed (7%), and 6% of the texts were dedicated to both political life and economy within the context of pandemic. In other words, the focus of most of the media outlets was primarily on confronting political and social actors with coronavirus and pandemic consequences.

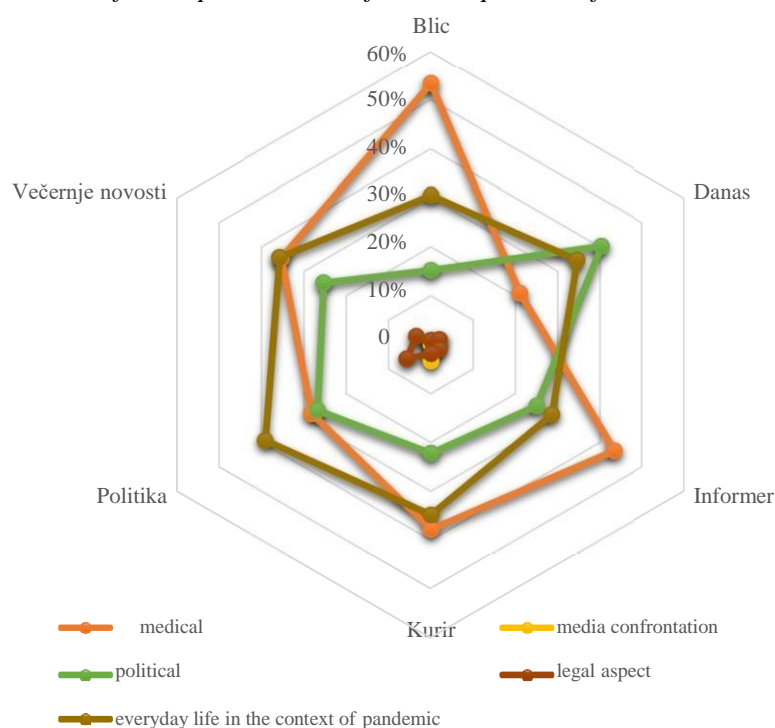
Table 1 - Coverage interpretative framework against the topic

Coverage topics/interpretative framework		medical	media	political	legal	everyday life in the context of pandemic	total
Overview of the situation in Serbia		192	0	17	7	50	266
State measures		68	0	72	17	77	234
Fight against coronavirus		136	0	12	0	43	191
Overview of the situation in the world		61	0	16	1	28	106
Political life in Serbia		3	0	96	1	2	102
Economy and coronavirus		3	0	25	4	66	98
Entertainment and coronavirus		3	0	1	1	80	85
Sports and coronavirus		4	0	0	0	59	63
Society and coronavirus		3	0	4	1	51	59
Serbian foreign policy		8	0	49	0	2	59
Economic measures		0	0	44	0	14	58
Healthcare system from the perspective of state activity		31	0	6	0	0	37

Education and coronavirus	2	0	1	0	32	35
Region and coronavirus	6	0	24	1	3	34
Religion and coronavirus	3	0	5	0	26	34
Human rights/judiciary and coronavirus	2	1	5	12	12	32
International relations in the context of coronavirus	2	0	26	0	1	29
Population protection methods	29	0	0	0	0	29
Media rights and freedoms and coronavirus	1	16	8	1	2	28
Kosovo and coronavirus	3	0	9	0	3	15
Conspiracy theory	2	0	5	0	2	9
Return of the diaspora	1	0	1	1	3	6
total	563	17	426	47	556	1609

Coverage interpretative framework for coronavirus was mostly medical (35%) and within the context of everyday living conditions in the course of pandemic (35%). This is followed by political (26%), legal interpretative framework (3%) and texts within the context of media outlets confrontations in the course of the pandemic (1%). However, as presented in the **Graph 1**, individual media outlets observed different aspects of the current pandemic:

Graph 1 - Overview of the representation of the interpretative frameworks in media outlets



Blic

One fourth of the texts in Blic refer to the condition of the pandemic in Serbia, while 21% are dedicated to various aspect of the fight against coronavirus. Slightly higher representation of texts regarding the measures the Government imposed in Serbia in line with the pandemic stage (15%) is also observed. The first two topics are predominantly observed from the medical perspective¹ (84%, i.e. 85% of articles) and from an everyday life perspective (16%, i.e. 15% of the texts), while the measures are covered from all the aspect this media outlet perceived as relevant to the citizens: medical and political (both 26%), then from the everyday life angle (41%) and legal framework one (6%). The other topics in this newspaper were interpreted within the framework complementary to the topic itself.

Danas

Thematic wise, Danas is mostly focused on politics, which is also the dominant interpretative framework (40%). A wide range of topics, such as economy and industry², situation in the world³, media rights and freedoms⁴, were interpreted within the framework of politics and political decisions in Serbia and worldwide, while everyday (35%) and medical (21%) interpretative frameworks were of less importance. The most common topic in Danas is political life in Serbia in the times of pandemic (15%), followed by state measures in the fight against coronavirus, in terms of representation (11%), while the situation in Serbia is only the third topic in terms of presence (9%) in this media outlet.

Informer

Informer mostly covered the situation in Serbia (19%), different aspects of fight against coronavirus (14%) and measures undertaken (13%). Topics from the sphere of entertainment (11%) and sports (6%) are highly represented, which are almost as present as the world news (10%) or topics related to political life in Serbia (6%). Informer covered all topics mostly within the medical framework (43%), very often warning about possible bad outcomes⁵. The framework of everyday life in the times of pandemic is identified in 29%, and political in 25% of the published texts.

¹ Blic, 09.04.2020, *The real mortality rate is less than one percent*, p. 4

² Danas, 19.03.2020, *Amid the state of emergency, 450 people were fired thanks to the City of Belgrade*, p. 9

³ Danas, 31.03.2020, *One man decided so*, p. 21

⁴ Danas, 10.04.2020, *Long crisis dangerous for independent media outlets*, p.3

⁵ Informer, 09.04.2020, *Even healthy and strong people end up on ventilators!*, p. 4

Kurir

A similar distribution of topics is noted in Kurir: situation in Serbia (18%), state measures (17%), fight against coronavirus (14%), entertainment (9%), political life and the world (5% respectively). Interpretative framework of the topics is predominantly medical⁶ (38%). A significant share of the topics was observed from the standpoint of everyday life⁷ (35%), while the political aspect was present in 22% of the texts.

Politika

In line with the editorial policy of Politika prior to the pandemic, the distribution of coronavirus-related topics follows regular columns of this daily newspaper and their share in the total content. The situation in Serbia, state measures (13% each), economy (12%), fight against coronavirus (10%), society (8%) and region (5% of the texts) were the most common topics in the context of the pandemic. Politika mostly covered from the aspect of everyday life⁸ (39%), while the medical⁹ and political¹⁰ frameworks were equally present (28% and 27% of texts, respectively).

Večernje novosti

As per Večernje novosti, almost 39% of all texts refer to two topics: situation in Serbia (20%) and state measures (19%). The fight against coronavirus is the third topic according to the representation, and this media outlet covered it in 8% of the texts. 6% of the texts were written respectively about the foreign policy of Serbia during the pandemic and economic topics, while 5% of the texts were dedicated to economic measures and the state of the pandemic world-wide. Večernje novosti observes the topic mostly from the angle of everyday life¹¹ (36%) and medicine¹² (35%), while a quarter of the texts are written in a political interpretative framework.

Media coverage genres and forms

Most of the analysed media outlets were focused on covering current events, without researching the background of the story or problematizing or analysing the information placed by official or other sources. This type of reporting is mostly evident in Informer, where

⁶ Kurir, 28.02.2020, *Cooked meals and gloves protect from Corona!*, p. 6

⁷ Kurir, 14.03.2020, *On-line schooling at home and via RTS*, p. 4

⁸ Politika, 09.04.2020, *Customers do not buy strawberries for fear of the virus*, p. A13

⁹ Politika, 22.04.2020, *What do the work of doctors and treatment at the Fair look like?*, p. A1

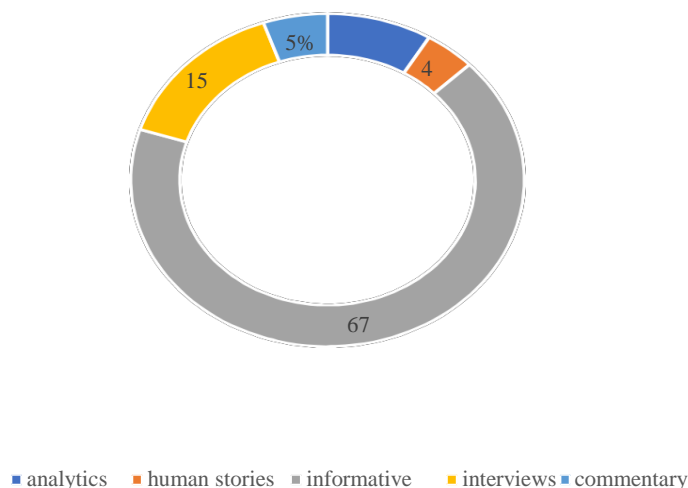
¹⁰ Politika, 21.03.2020, *Corona reveals sincere friends*, p. A1

¹¹ Večernje novosti, 06.05.2020, *Homes do not accept those cured from Corona*, p. 4

¹² Večernje novosti, 24.03.2020, *Mass testing, all infected in hospitals*, p. 4

almost 161 out of 196 analysed texts resulted from pure dissemination of available information. The only additional journalist work visible in these texts concerns sensationalization of the media content.¹³ Other media outlets, more than half of them, also presented information exclusively in the journalism genre of news and reports, without any interpretation of available data or statements.

Graph 2 - Overview of representation of journalism genres in all analysed media outlets



Daily newspaper Danas has a different approach - slightly less than half of its texts are informative. The idea to review publicly available information and problematize key issues related to coronavirus and pandemic is visible in the interviews, which make up almost a quarter of all articles published in this paper. For the sake of comparison, Danas published 70, while Informer announced only 8 interviews on its front pages.

The analytical genre is most represented in the daily newspaper Politika, where articles make up 18% of sample (64 texts). However, the role of these texts was not to problematize circumstances related to state decisions regarding coronavirus, these texts were rather additional explanation¹⁴ and confirmation of the justification of measures and actions of the state in all spheres of action, while responsibility shifted to other social actors and citizens. Thus, for example, the analytical text explains that the food supply in Serbia "is sufficient", but that "there is a lack of workers to deliver additional goods"¹⁵ or that "children in home quarantine" *must* receive "clear instructions for living" from their parents, who are recognized as the sole

¹³ Informer, 25.03.2020, *Spaniards have left the old people to die*, p. 8

¹⁴ Politika, 16.03.2020, *Reason for drastic measures*, p. A1; Politika, 16.03.2020; *Serbian Armed Forces in its third mission*, p. A1

¹⁵ Politika, 18.03.2020, *There are plenty of fruits and vegetables in stock*, p. A20

actors responsible for their children wellbeing¹⁶.

On the other hand, the daily newspaper Danas, examined various aspects of the fright against coronavirus in 38 articles, but also the socio-political circumstances and possible consequences of the pandemic both in Serbia and worldwide. Most of these texts were written in a critical tone and were aimed at decision-makers, who were asked to respond in the interest of the public¹⁷. Analytical texts in this media outlet are also a form through which Danas explicitly criticizes the government¹⁸, along with the comments that, in addition to the role of criticizing the competent authorities, were focused on other actors as well. Comments were mostly represented in this daily paper (35 or 12%), while greater share of texts in this genre was not observed in other media outlets.

Regardless of the fact that coronavirus has a huge impact on people's lives, people's life stories were not represented on the front pages of the analysed media outlets, where only 4% of the texts were written from the angle of pandemic consequences for specific individuals, from their personal perspective. A comparative review shows that the largest number of this form of texts was published on the cover pages of Kurir, a total of 17. Human stories are mostly presented in everyday life during the pandemic, in a wide range of topics in which, besides individual stories of patients and healthcare professionals¹⁹, social and entertainment topics are also highly represented²⁰.

Table 2- Share of journalism genre in the media outlets

Media outlet/genre	analytics	stories about people ²¹	informative	interview	commentary	total
Blic	4%	6%	70%	16%	4%	100%
Danas	13%	2%	49%	24%	12%	100%
Informer	3%	8%	82%	4%	3%	100%
Kurir	3%	6%	68%	19%	4%	100%
Politika	18%	1%	67%	10%	5%	100%
Večernje novosti	5%	3%	73%	15%	3%	100%
total	9%	4%	67%	15%	5%	100%

¹⁶ Politika, 23.03.2020, *Children in home quarantine*, p. A7

¹⁷ Danas, 13.03.2020, *The public needs to know whether the healthcare system is ready*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Danas, 10.03.2020, *Vučić uses corona for the election campaign*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Blic, 13.04.2020, *She was aware of the risk, but she did not want to leave her patients*, p.4

²⁰ Informer, 28.04.2020, *Nata: I gained 7kg in one month*, p. 17.

²¹ Human interest story

Coverage approach

Most of the print media outlets in Serbia sought to **inform the citizens** primarily about the Covid- 19 pandemic – about medical, political, economic and other aspects of “life at the time of Corona”, so that within all the analysed texts, 1311 were informative and written in a way to explain a particular event or phenomenon within the context of coronavirus. These texts were in 98% of cases based on the facts further explained in the text, and around 38% had no clear motive. However, besides the information in the public interest, media practices going beyond the framework of professional coverage were also observed. In the course of the observed period, the analysed daily newspapers politicised the coronavirus-related topics, spread panic or minimized the gravity of the situation, diverted attention from the important topics to curiosities or information which were not of the public interest and thus, to a certain extent, further confused the citizens who were already exposed to an abundance of information. Media outlets were confronting each other, with accusations that the information published by daily newspapers with different editorial policy were fake news.

Table 3 - Distribution of texts per media outlets in relation to the coverage approach

Approach/media outlet	Blic	Danas	Informer	Kurir	Politika	Večernje novosti	total
coronavirus coverage	213	237	113	197	332	219	1311
politicization of the pandemic	2	38	27	33	25	25	150
curiosities and bizarreness	4	9	21	20	4	9	67
fear/panic spreading	3	2	27	11	1	5	49
media conflicts	0	9	2	8	0	0	19
minimizing the gravity of the situation	1	0	6	1	3	2	13
total	223	295	196	270	365	260	1609

Media outlets **politicised** the coronavirus topic in 9% of the texts. That practice was observed in the following daily newspapers Informer²² (14% of the analysed texts in this daily paper) and Danas²³ (13%), then in Kurir²⁴ (12%), Večernje novosti²⁵ (10%) and Politika²⁶ (7%), which

²² Informer, 31.03.2020, *Thank you, Chinese brothers*, p. 11

²³ Danas, 30.03.2020, *I avoid Vučić's speeches*, p. 15

²⁴ Kurir, 25.03.2020, *Đilas' associate robbed Belgrade and invested the money in bakeries*, p. 12

²⁵ Večernje novosti, 31.03.2020, *Breathing on a NATO ventilator*, p. 6

²⁶ Politika, 10.04.2020, *Low blows from social media against Vučić*, p. A1

implied political contextualization of the coronavirus-related challenges in the texts in which the observation of the topic in such fashion was not necessary. Almost 40% of these texts have no clear motive, they were rather written as a consequence of the interests of the editorial board. In Danas, out of 38 texts that politicized the coronavirus consequences, 17 do not have clear motive (45%), while in Informer a third of politicized texts have no motive. However, almost half of these texts published in Informer were in no way based on the facts presented in the text (48%)²⁷. A similar approach is observed in Kurir, where almost one third of the texts were not based on the presented facts, in Večernje novosti in 24% and Politika in 12% of the politicized texts. On the other hand, Danas based such texts mostly on the facts further explained in the text (92%).

Around 4% of the texts covered **curiosities** which were not relevant in the public information context²⁸ - from the information about world celebrities, to bizarre conspiracy theories, such as the harmfulness of the 5G network. Such an approach was mostly observed in the tabloids Informer²⁹ (11%) and Kurir³⁰ (7%), and almost all media outlets referred to some kind of facts in such texts. The sole exception was the daily paper Kurir, where one fourth of these texts were non-fact based. On the other hand, 61% of these articles had no clear motive.

The way these dailies **spread panic** over coronavirus on a daily basis in the period between 5 March and 15 April was particularly indicative, when 49 texts (3%) in which media outlets took such approach were published on their cover pages. One to 7 texts a day could have been considered as the content that spreads panic, with more than half of these articles published in Informer³¹ (27). Almost 84% of the articles had clear motive, and information mostly originated from the official sources (26 texts), foreign sources - 18 and healthcare workers - 9, which were independently or jointly with the other types of sources named in these texts.

²⁷ Informer, 28.04.2020, *Đilas' supporters provoke conflicts in the midst of the infection!*, p. 2

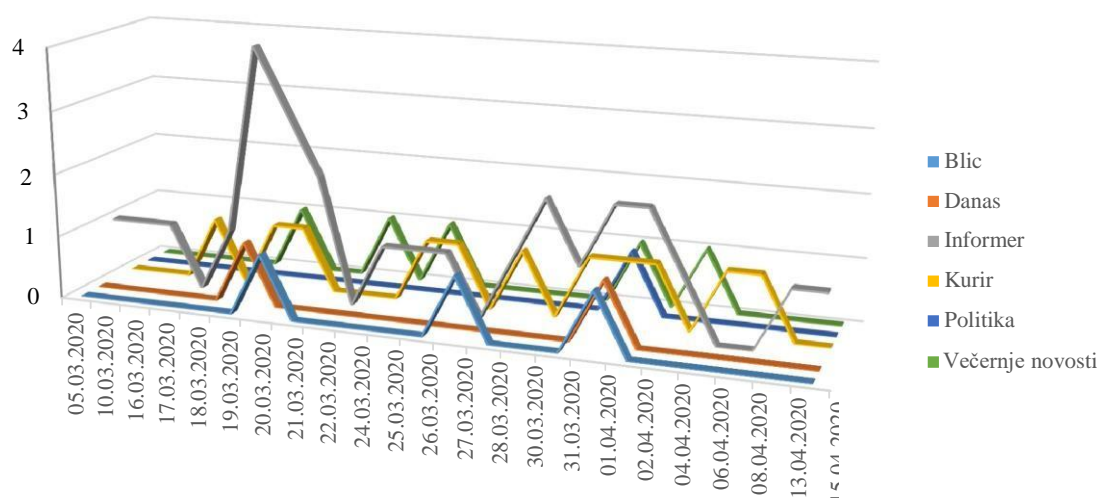
²⁸ Informer, 21.03.2020, *Police chased Marija!*, p. 18

²⁹ Informer, 17.03.2020, *Brena and Boba in quarantine*, p. 16

³⁰ Kurir, 14.03.2020, *Human low life*, p. 16

³¹ Informer, 20.03.2020, *Army cremates the deceased in Italy*, p. 6

Graph 3 – Distribution of texts that spread panic, per media outlet and days



On 19 March 2020, daily newspapers published on their cover pages 7 texts which spread panic, of which as many as 4 in Informer. Those were the texts that indicated for the first time to the new reality of the state of emergency, which was introduced a few days earlier. An almost uniform principle of presentation could be seen on the front pages: a) the possibility of repressive implementation of measures, which was further illustrated by photographs of armed and police forces on the streets, along with b) frightening comparative information mostly from Italy and Spain, intensified by the photographs of coffins.

The same number of texts in which the media outlets took this approach (7) was also observed on 1 April 2020. All texts invoked the possibility of “the Italian and Spanish scenario” in the Republic of Serbia and represented a kind of continuation of public warning, which was initiated the previous evening (31 March) by sending a warning SMS to some Serbian citizens. In that message, the Crisis Management Committee warned the citizens that the coronavirus- related situation could be worsened as in the countries that were most severely affected by the epidemic.

Illustration 1 - Cover pages of daily newspapers from the sample for 19 March 2020



Illustration 2 - Cover pages of daily newspapers from the sample for 01 April 2020



From 28 February to 5 May, texts with visible **perspective of media conflicts** were published on the front pages of Kurir, Informer and Danas. That practically means that the media outlets played an active role in the conflict in which they advocated for their views. The daily Danas published 9 texts of this kind, and they referred to the arrest of a journalist Ana Lalić³², criticism of the behaviour of other journalists in general, and in particular during the press conference of the Crisis Management Committee³³ and critics of TV Pink for broadcasting its reality show Zadruga. On the other hand, Kurir (8 texts) and Informer (2) confronted the media outlets that were critically inclined towards the authorities. Informer criticised N1, blaming it to be “sick haters”³⁴ who “attack doctors“, while

³² Danas, 09.04.2020, *My texts are confirmed by the growing number of healthcare professionals*, p. 5

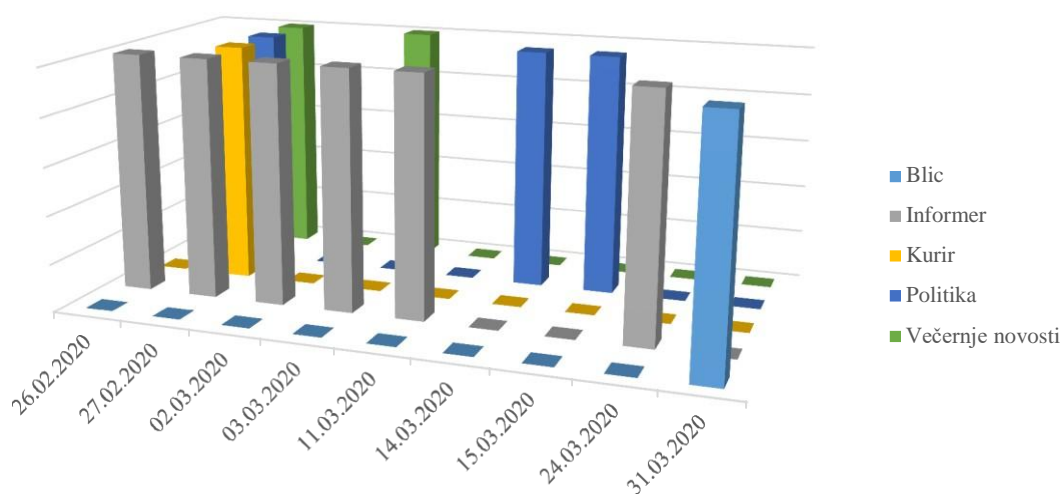
³³ Danas, 23.04.2020, *Situation in Serbia is of no importance to the regime media outlets*, p. 2

³⁴ Informer, 02.04.2020, *Sick haters on N1 attack doctors as well!?*, p. 5

Kurir accused N1 that it „consciously subverted Kon and the healthcare system“³⁵. The daily Danas based all of its texts written within this approach on the facts presented in the texts. In contrast, 3 out of 8 texts in Kurir and both articles in Informer were not substantiated by facts, while more than three fourth of articles had no motive. The analysed media outlets directly accused each other of spreading fake news, and that practice is most visible in Kurir (13 articles), Danas (9) and Informer (8), Politika stated this type of accusation in 4, and Blic and Večernje novosti in one text respectively.

The approach that was most noticeable at the very beginning of the pandemic was **to minimize the gravity of the situation**, when the media outlets without any critical review reported the statements of officials and experts that coronavirus was "the funniest virus in the world", "existing only on Facebook" and that citizens could "go shopping to Italy" (12 front pages of Informer, Kurir, Politika, Večernje novosti and Blic). Informer was in the forefront of this practice, and its journalists and editors resorted to this way of reporting³⁶ on 26 and 27 February, as well as on 2, 3 and 24 March, while the day after the press conference held in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, where the stated allegations were made (27 February 2020), Kurir, Informer, Politika and Večernje novosti also tried to minimize the gravity of the situation with their texts. In 82% of the texts the media outlets based their claims on the facts, and 62% of the articles had a clear motive, 10 texts contained statements of officials, while 7 cited healthcare workers as a source.

Graph 4 - Distribution of texts minimizing the gravity of the situation in all media outlets



³⁵ Kurir, 15.04.2020, *They are consciously subverting Kon and the healthcare system*, p. 4

³⁶ Informer, 26.02.2020. *Corona is no more dangerous than the flue*, p. 6

Sources

The selection of sources indicates the way in which the media outlets approach their reporting, that is, the basis of the media content they publish. The most common sources in the analysed texts were the official ones - members of the Crisis Management Committee, President of the Republic of Serbia, Prime Minister, ministries and other institutions directly responsible for the fight against coronavirus³⁷. In 259 texts, these sources were the only type of source on which the entire text was based, while in other 354 texts they were one of the sources. In texts with multiple sources, officials were the source alongside the healthcare workers (47 texts), social actors³⁸ (31), foreign (18), political power³⁹ (18), media outlets (17), analysts (13) and unnamed sources (11). 38% of all analysed texts originated or contained the views of officials - in most media outlets, official sources were represented in 37% to 45%⁴⁰ of all published texts, and the lowest representation of official sources was in Danas (21%). Additionally, sources from different levels of government were represented in other 10% of the texts of all dailies. On the other hand, opposition political actors were source in 93 texts, out of which 55 were in Danas.

When all the analysed media outlets are considered, other social actors are the most represented as a source in Danas (39%) and at the same time represent the dominant source of all articles published in this daily. Blic used social actors as source the least (19%). Among the analysed newspapers, Politika and Informer mostly used foreign sources (27% and 26% of the articles, respectively). The largest share of healthcare sources - doctors, medical staff, is in Blic (25%).

Unnamed sources are most represented in Informer and Kurir (12% of texts each), and the least in Danas (2%), and in the entire sample they were identified in 8% of texts. Patients and citizens are visible in only 116 texts, which makes only 7% of all published texts. They are most represented in Večernje novosti (12% of articles), and the least in Politika (4%).

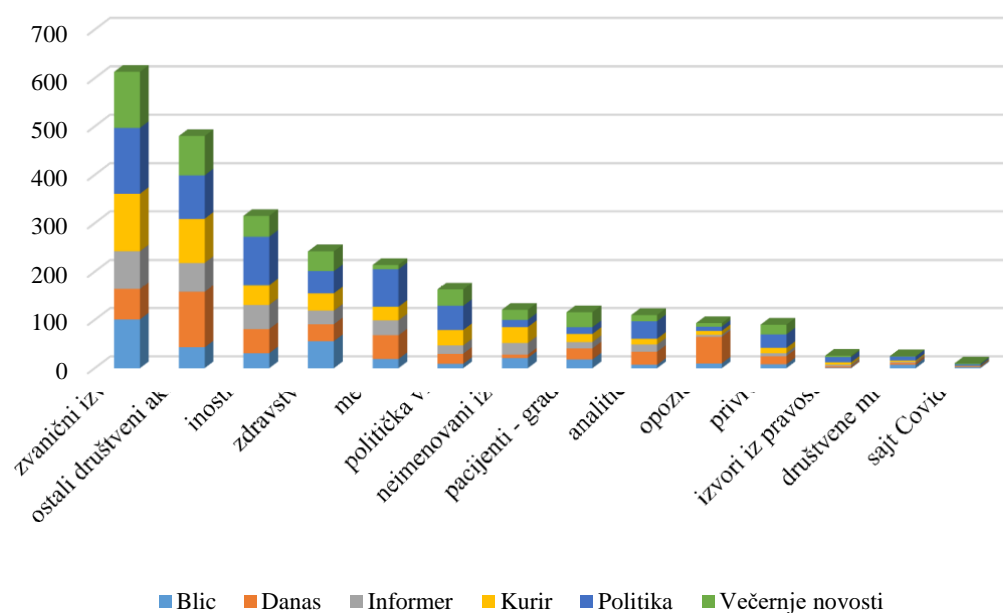
³⁷ In addition, political authorities were used as source in 136 texts

³⁸ All relevant actors from public life, in the field of culture, stare, entertainment, sport

³⁹ Representatives of the authorities, except for the Government of Serbia and the teams in charge of pandemic suppression

⁴⁰ Blic and Večernje novosti 45% each, Kurir 44%, Informer 40% and Politika 37%

Graph 5 - Distribution of sources per media outlets



The indicative finding is that only one type of source was identified in 951 texts. For example, in Politika, as many as 60 texts are based on citing only official sources, while in Danas there are only 9 such texts. In Blic, healthcare workers are the only source in 27 texts, and in Kurir unnamed sources are the only source in 11 texts. The attitude towards the opposition is especially interesting, which was the exclusive source in Danas in 29 articles, while Informer and Večernje novosti did not conceive any text in that way (more in **Table 4**).

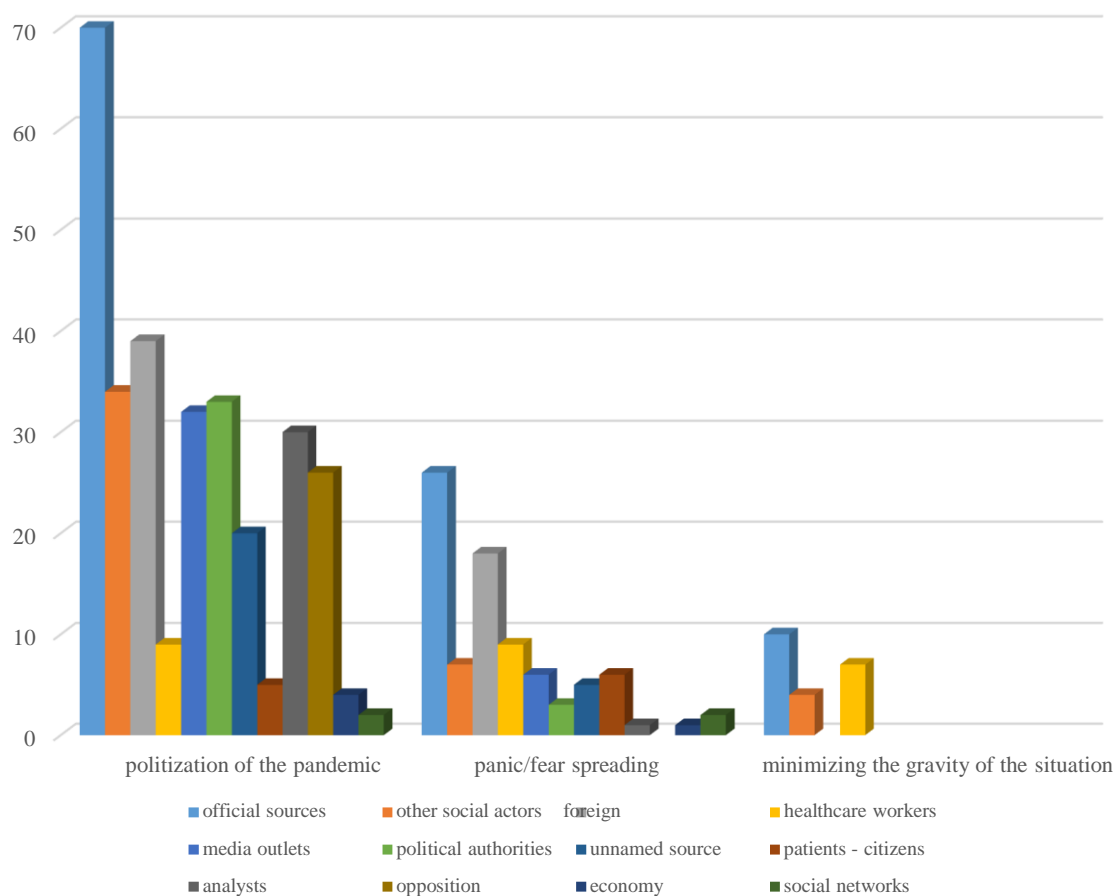
Table 4 - Distribution of texts containing only one type of source, per media outlet

Type of source/media outlet	Blic	Danas	Informer	Kurir	Politika	Večernje novosti	total
other social actors	32	80	27	59	50	53	301
official sources	58	9	36	51	60	45	259
foreign sources	6	23	20	13	28	20	110
healthcare workers	27	14	7	8	4	5	65
opposition	4	29	0	1	2	0	36
patients - citizens	6	8	3	4	5	9	35
media outlets	2	7	4	6	11	3	33
political authorities	3	4	0	4	10	9	30
economy	3	5	0	1	10	9	28
unnamed sources	2	0	4	11	2	2	21
analysts	0	8	2	0	5	2	17
sources from	1	0	0	0	8	2	11

Judiciary							
social networks	2	1	0	0	1	0	4
Covid-19 web page	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
total	147	188	103	158	196	159	951

The role of source is of special importance in achieving specific results of media work which in the context of the pandemic refer to the spread of fear and panic, minimizing the gravity of the situation and politicizing the pandemic. As already stated, the views of official sources are represented in 26 texts in which panic was spread in some way, as well as in 10 texts in which the gravity of the situation was minimized.

Graph 6 - Distribution of sources according to approaches in all media outlets



Media perception of responsibility for pandemic

In 83 texts published or announced on the front pages, the culprit for the pandemic was directly indicated, and in 41% of those texts the citizens were blamed "for irresponsible behaviour" (34 texts), mostly in Kurir (13). The government was presented as the culprit for

the way it led the fight against the pandemic in 17 texts, all of which were published in Danas⁴¹. In Blic, Politika and Večernje novosti, political structures were not addressed in terms of responsibility, unlike returnees from abroad ("gastarbeiter" in the texts), citizens and other social actors.

A particularly targeted group of citizens were the returnees from abroad, who were directly accused of spreading coronavirus and endangering the health system of Serbia. They were primarily the target of state officials, and then the media outlets took over the rhetoric.⁴² Also, Serbian citizens were fully criticized for their way of living during the state of emergency, especially in the daily Kurir, which published 13 articles characterizing the daily activities of citizens as irresponsible. The media outlets, such as Informer, even addressed citizens directly, urging them to "come to their senses" and "respect the measures of the Government of Serbia"⁴³

Table 5 - Distribution of "those responsible for the pandemic" per media outlet

Media outlet/culprits	citizens	authorities	other social actors	"gastarbeiter"	opposition	total
Blic	3	0	3	2	0	8
Danas	0	17	0	0	0	17
Informer	8	0	4	2	2	16
Kurir	13	0	2	2	6	23
Politika	6	0	3	3	0	12
Večernje novosti	4	0	1	2	0	7
total	34	17	13	11	8	83

Presence of actors

Within the content analysis, 3 key actors were mapped in relation to each text which covered coronavirus and its consequences for society. According to their function in the text, the actors were divided into those who actively participated, who expressed their opinion, and those who were the subject of reporting, about which other actors or the media outlet expressed some kind of standpoint: criticism, praise, or only mentioning in a broader context. Also, the value context in which the actor was situated is registered, regardless of the function s/he has in the text: neutral, positive or negative.

⁴¹ Danas, 03.04.2020, *The disease has spread due to bad moves*, p. 4

⁴² Večernje novosti, 19.03.2020, *Whoever comes and infects the other person goes to prison*, p. 5

⁴³ Informer, 23.03.2020, *The second victim of coronavirus*, p. 4

Among all categories of actors, the most represented are the President and the Serbian Government (731 appearances⁴⁴). The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, is the most present actor (286 appearances), three times more frequent than the following one, the Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić (93). During the analysed period, Aleksandar Vučić was present on the front pages almost every day in the context of the fight against coronavirus (**Graph 7**) and most often his role in the text was active (65% of articles), as well as the role of the Serbian Prime Minister (70%), while the frequency of her daily presence was significantly lower (**Graph 8**).

When it comes to Aleksandar Vučić, most of the texts in which he played an active role were published in Kurir and Večenje novosti (46 articles each), and the least in Danas (5). In 96% of the texts of the latter daily newspaper, Vučić was passive as an actor. Within these articles, he was criticized by the media outlet itself and other actors in 50, and the media itself explicitly expressed negative value attitude⁴⁵ in 45 articles⁴⁶. In Večernje novosti Aleksandar Vučić was praised in 6 texts, while the total number of positively connoted texts in this media outlet is 10. An even larger number of positively connoted articles was observed in Kurir - 15 (**Table 15** in the Appendix). The most intensive expression of the positive attitude of the media outlet towards Aleksandar Vučić was in the texts in which he was presented as the bearer of the "fight against coronavirus"⁴⁷ - 38 texts (10 in Informer and Kurir, 9 in Večernje novosti, 7 in Politika and 2 in Blic).

The Serbian Prime Minister, who chaired the COVID-19 Crisis Management Committee, was an active participant in 65 texts, a subject to criticism in 9 and a subject of praise in one article in Večernje Novosti. The value attitude towards the Prime Minister was neutral in as many as 94% of texts⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ Distribution of other actors from the Serbian Government is presented in the **table 14** in the Appendix.

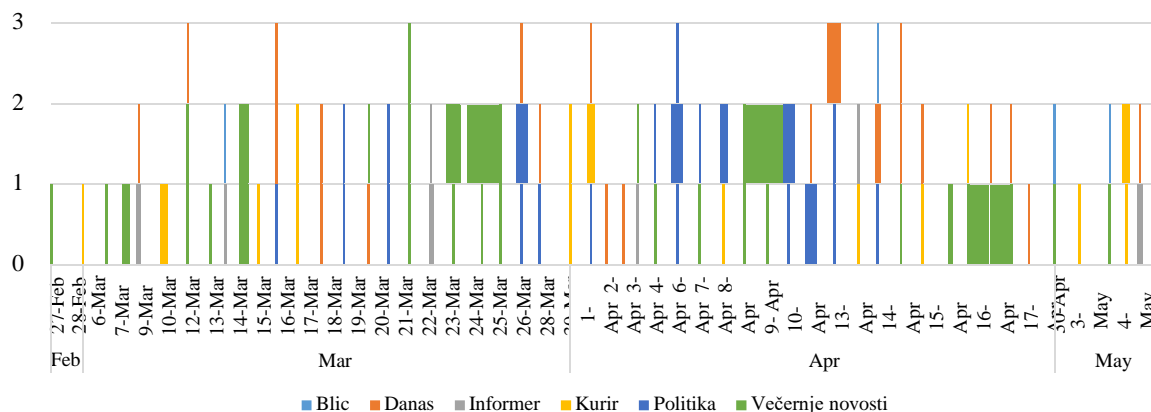
⁴⁵ All analysed media outlets assumed their values regarding the Serbian President in positive way in 14%, while the negative connotation was in 16% of texts.

⁴⁶ The example depicting the difference between the criticism of a passive actor expressed by an interlocutor in the text and the criticism either joined or independently represented by the very media outlet (negative value context) can be seen in the texts - in Blic, published on 17.04.2020, *Unprofessional political party cadres are now claiming their dues* (p. 22), in which the media outlet gave room for criticism expressed by the interlocutor towards the President of Serbia and in Danas (*Vučić is trying to get out of the game by playing all or nothing*, 03.04.2020, p. 8), wherein the journalist joined the criticism expressed by the interlocutor with the asked questions and the selection of headlines and subtitles.

⁴⁷ Kurir, 16.03.2020, *Vučić: Surrender is not an option! Closing life so as to save lives*, p. 2

⁴⁸ With 5 negative in the daily Danas and one positive text in Kurir

Graph 7 - Distribution of texts in which Aleksandar Vučić is one of the key actors



Graph 8 - Distribution of texts in which Ana Brnabić is one of the key actors

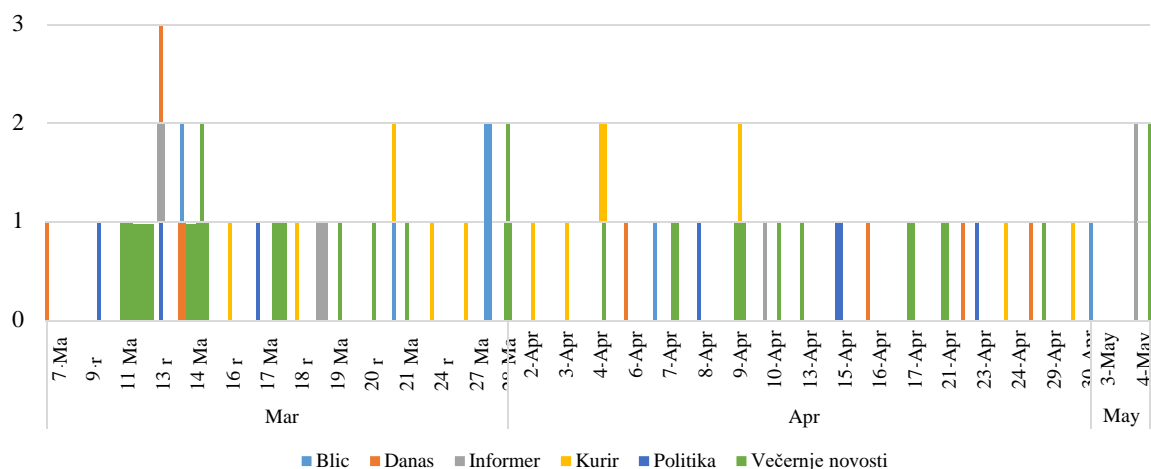


Table 6 - The role of Aleksandar Vučić as an actor in the texts, per media outlet

Media outlet / Aleksandar Vučić	active participation	passive participation			
	expresses his views	mentioned	subject to criticism	subject of praise	total
Blic	24	4	2	1	31
Danas	5	13	50	0	68
Informer	26	3	0	3	32
Kurir	46	1	0	3	50
Politika	40	5	0	3	48
Večernje novosti	46	5	0	6	57
total	187	31	52	16	286

The medical experts, members of the Crisis Management Committee or those informing the public about the aspects of the pandemic, were present in 601 appearances. The expert who was the key actor in most of the texts was Dr Predrag Kon (126), and in most of the articles he had an active role to inform (90% of articles).

He had a passive role in 12 texts, out of which he was praised in 6, while he was subject to criticism in one. The media treated him in a positive context in 4 texts. The next actor based on the participation is Dr Darija Kisić Tepavčević, represented in 90 texts, in 88% of which she actively informed the audience, while she was mentioned in 11 texts, criticized in 2, and her work was praised in 4 texts. The media expressed the value context towards her in 7 texts, 6 positive and 1 negative. The actor who is most criticized is Dr Branimir Nestorović, who is subject to criticism in 6 texts, and the negative attitude of the media towards him is expressed in 5 (more in Table 7)⁴⁹.

Table 7 - The role of experts as actors in the texts, per media outlet

Actor/all media outlets	active participation	passive participation			
	expresses personal view	mentioned	subject to criticism	subject of praise	total
Predrag Kon	114	5	1	6	126
Darija Kisić Tepavčević	79	5	2	4	90
Branislav Todorović	49	2	0	0	51
Zoran Radovanović	33	1	0	1	35
Goran Stevanović	29	0	0	1	30
Branimir Nestorović	17	1	6	0	24
Zoran Gojković	16	0	0	0	16
Srđa Janković	12	0	0	0	12
Danica Grujičić	7	0	0	1	8
“Chinese medical team”	5	0	0	3	8
Verica Jovanović	7	0	0	0	7
Mijomir Pelemiš	4	0	0	0	4
Tatjana Radosavljević	4	0	0	0	4
Rade Panić	4	0	0	0	4
the others	160	6	3	13	182
total	540	20	12	29	601

Political actors from the county and the region, who were also represented in the analysed texts are the opposition (164), other state authorities and institutions (93), actors from the region (48), representatives of the ruling parties (34), actors from Kosovo (16).

Concerning the opposition actors, the media outlets paid special attention to the President of the Party of Freedom and Justice, Dragan Djilas, who is an actor in 35 texts, of which 66% was negatively connoted by the media outlets. Dragan Djilas was mostly subject to criticism

⁴⁹ For the value context in relation to experts see Table 16 in the Appendix.

in dailies Kurir and Informer⁵⁰, and in some texts (8) he was presented as an actor who "wants the corona to win"⁵¹, which was a form of discrediting (in Kurir in 4 texts, Informer - 3 and Večernje novosti - 1).

Table 8 - The role of Dragan Djilas as an actor in the texts, per media outlet

Media outlet/Dragan Đilas	active participation	passive participation			
	presents his view	mentioned	subject to criticism	subject of praise	total
Blic	0	1	0	0	1
Danas	5	0	0	0	5
Informer	0	1	9	0	10
Kurir	1	0	11	0	12
Politika	0	2	1	0	3
Večernje novosti	0	1	3	0	4
total	6	5	24	0	35

Out of the key foreign actors, who were highly represented (475 appearances), the most represented was the President of the USA, Donald Trump (45)⁵², the EU (34)⁵³, World Health Organisation, and a special role was played by representatives of China (50 appearances) - in texts defined as "Chinese authorities" (22 texts), then Chinese President Xi Jinping (17) and that country's ambassador Chen Bo (11). These actors were positively represented by the media outlets in 26 texts, while the other texts were written in a neutral fashion. Vladimir Putin was also an actor in 16 texts, positively presented in 5 articles.

In addition to the above, the most frequently identified groups of actors were economic actors (125 appearances), analysts (102), citizens (96), representatives of religious communities (82), patients and celebrities (50 appearances each), actors from the judiciary (26). and representatives of independent bodies (2). Among other social actors, tennis player Novak Djoković (25), football player Luka Jović (8), playwright Biljana Srbljanović, president of the Football Association of Serbia Slaviša Kokeza and "YouTuber" Bogdan Ilić (Baka Prase) had high representation during the analysed period. Luka Jović and Bogdan Ilić were criticized by the media outlets for their behaviour during the pandemic and were, as public figures, an individual example of irresponsible behaviour, while Biljana Srbljanović and Slaviša Kokeza were an example of how celebrities fight the disease.

⁵⁰ Please see more in **table 17** in the Appendix

⁵¹ Informer, 23.04.2020, *They are cheering for coronavirus to postpone the elections*, p. 10

⁵² Explicitly negatively presented in the media outlets in 9 texts

⁵³ Negatively presented by media outlets in 10 articles

Research results – TV stations

Coverage topics and interpretative framework

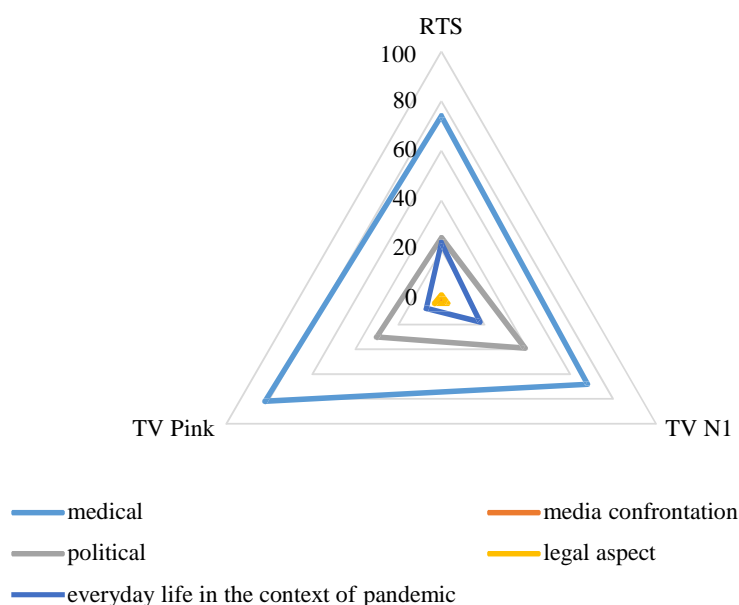
The range of topics within which TV stations reported on coronavirus and pandemic in the first two features announced in the news of the day was largely reduced to the fight against coronavirus, the measures introduced and implemented by the state, and an overview of the situation in Serbia, i.e. daily reporting on statistics and patient status. RTS and TV N1 have a very similar representation of these topics (fight against coronavirus: RTS — 41 features, TV N1 - 44; measures of the state RTS - 31, N1 - 35 items), while TV Pink reported to a greater extent than the other two media on daily-current overviews of the situation, without thorough analyses of the data and information coming from official sources (33 features). TV N1 paid special attention to the functionality of the health system (11) and media rights and freedoms (6 features), while TV Pink reported more on the foreign policy activities of Serbian officials during the coronavirus era, while focusing on economic measures adopted by the Serbian government (4). TV N1 reported the most on political life in Serbia in the context of coronavirus (5 features).

Table 9 - Distribution of topics per media

Topic/media outlet	RTS	TV N1	TV Pink	total
fight against coronavirus	41	44	39	124
state measures	31	35	28	94
overview of the situation in Serbia	22	21	33	76
health system from the state activity perspective	9	11	7	27
overview of the situation in the world	9	3	3	15
media rights and freedoms and coronavirus	0	6	2	8
political life in Serbia	1	5	2	8
Serbian foreign policy	2	0	5	7
economic measures	4	0	1	5
religion and coronavirus	1	1	1	3
economy and coronavirus	2	1	0	3
region and coronavirus	1	0	0	1
Kosovo and coronavirus	0	0	1	1
human rights/judiciary and coronavirus	0	1	0	1
return of the diaspora	1	0	0	1
population protection measures	0	0	1	1
education and coronavirus	0	1	0	1
total	124	129	123	376

The interpretation of the pandemic was mostly in **the medical framework** (60% of the features), followed by the political framework (25%), then the context of everyday life during the pandemic (13%), legal (2%) and the framework of media conflicts (1%). The share of features that observed the topic within the medical framework was the highest on TV Pink - 67%, while slightly less features from this angle were presented in Dnevnik 2 RTS (60%). The fewest features that considered the medical aspect were noticed on TV N1 - 53%. The representation of the political framework among the analysed media outlets also differs, more precisely, that perspective was most represented on N1 - 30%, while 20% of such features were registered on RTS. The everyday life of citizens was mostly in the focus of features on RTS (19%), while TV Pink (6%) dealt with this insight the least (**Chart 9**).

Graph 9 - Overview of the representation of interpretative frameworks per media outlets



The indicative finding is that the medical framework of reporting on the pandemic on RTS and TV Pink was not predominantly focused on direct medical practice - healthcare workers who directly fought the pandemic, but was aimed at officials (including the Crisis Management Committee), who dealt with general insights, statistics and measures⁵⁴. More precisely, the medical aspect was often viewed in the context of public health, while the process of treating individual patients, prevention and everyday medical practice in the circumstances of pandemic were out of focus. Examples of this practice are: a) TV Pink feature where

⁵⁴ Healthcare workers were an independent source in 2 features produced within the medical framework on TV N1, while they were one of the sources in 22 features (RTS 18%, TV N1 12% and TV Pink 4% of features within the medical framework).

Provincial Secretary of Health Dr Zoran Gojković was chosen to speak about the health condition of specific patients, for whose treatment he was not responsible⁵⁵, while b) the public service dehumanized citizens, turning them into numbers, which was most visible in the feature in which the presenter while on the air informed the public that “everything is getting better” and that “in the last 24 hours 5446 people were tested, 222 tested positive to coronavirus and 6 people died”.⁵⁶ On the other hand, TV N1 tried to problematize the medical aspect in the context of doctors, patients and citizens, even when the official source was the only available source of information.⁵⁷

The political framework of reporting in completely different ways is visible in the three analysed media. RTS provided most room for the state officials to explain their decisions, but also to their individual activities, which took place throughout Serbia during the pandemic⁵⁸. TV Pink did not examine the decisions and activities of state bodies, and in its news program it gave significant space to state officials who promoted their work and dealt with political opponents. In these features, the other side or different opinion which could in any way question the official position was completely excluded.⁵⁹

TV N1 reported in the political framework of the pandemic, reviewing individual government decisions from the point of view of public interest, without essentially questioning the necessity of respecting the measures⁶⁰.

The media outlets explained differently how the measures of the state reflected on **the everyday life of the citizens**. RTS tried to point out the consequences of individual measures on various aspects of people's lives up to the local level, in order to provide citizens with information directly related to their lives⁶¹. TV N1, on the other hand, reported about the consequences of new circumstances caused by coronavirus in the context of everyday life more from the perspective of citizens, to some extent including their voices into their reports⁶². TV Pink had a significantly different approach: to a much lesser extent, it thematised everyday life in the time of the corona and presented it from the point of view of the state. From the perspective of everyday life, 7 features were broadcast, 6 of which related to life in Serbia and were mainly focused on the introduction of the state of emergency (2) and 31 March, when an SMS was sent to some of

⁵⁵ TV Pink, 14.03.2020, Nacionalni dnevnik, the first feature

⁵⁶ RTS, 28.04.2020, Dnevnik 2, the first feature

⁵⁷ TV N1, 17.04.2020, Dnevnik 19, the first feature

⁵⁸ Example: RTS, Dnevnik 2, 30.03.2020, the second feature

⁵⁹ TV Pink, 05.04.2020, Nacionalni dnevnik, the second feature

⁶⁰ TV N1, 13.03.2020, Dnevnik 19, 30.03.2020, the second feature

⁶¹ RTS, 17.03.2020, Dnevnik 2, daily news, the second feature

⁶² TV N1, 05.04.2020, 19, the second feature

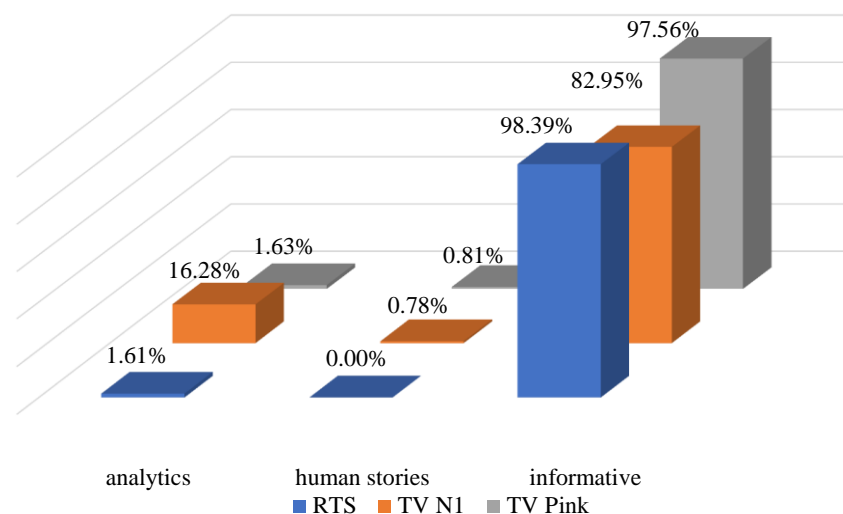
the citizens mentioning “Italian and Spanish scenario”⁶³ (3 features). TV Pink used this interpretative framework to objectify the citizens, blaming them for spreading the epidemic (4 features).

Media coverage genres and forms

Radio Television Serbia (RTS) and TV Pink mainly reported within the framework of **informative genre**. In the researched content, only in 2 features did the RTS additionally analyse the information it held, while the citizens were not in the primary focus of any feature in the central news program. TV Pink also broadcasted 2 analytical features, along with one which dealt with the citizens, while the analysis was not aimed at informing the public about the corona virus, but focused on the intra-media confrontation and "defence" of the President Aleksandar Vučić from media questions⁶⁴.

TV N1 had a slightly different approach to informing the public - 21 analytical features were broadcasted in the investigative programs. In 14 of them citizens were informed about various aspects, especially problems that arose during the fight against coronavirus⁶⁵, while 7 features had a political aspect⁶⁶ as well.

Graph 10 - Overview of the representation of genres per the analysed media outlets



When it comes to the forms of television expression, within the central daily news programs, the most common were the forms of reporting in terms of informative blocks, which

⁶³ See page 13

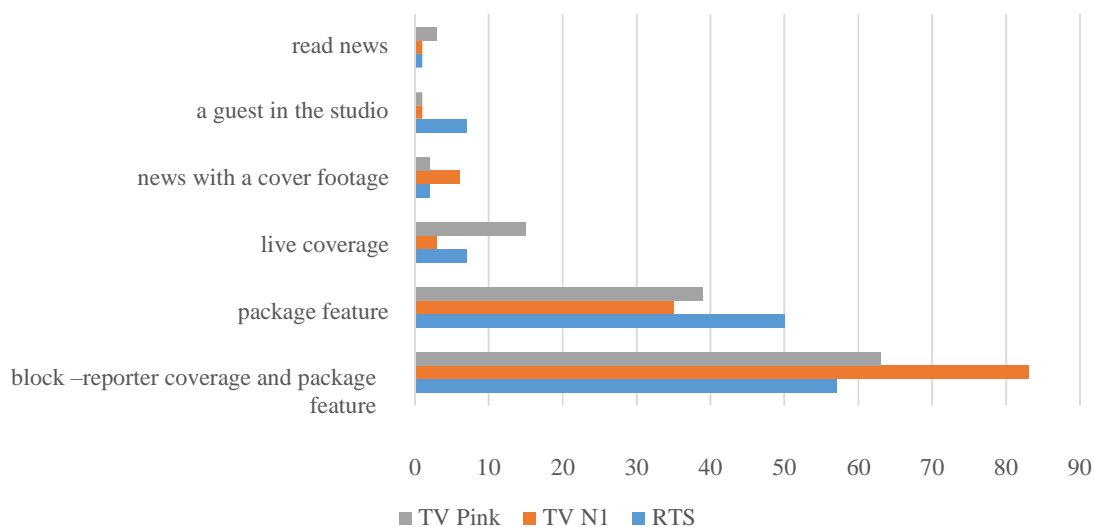
⁶⁴ TV Pink, 09.04.2020, Nacionalni dnevnik, second feature

⁶⁵ TV N1, 03.04.2020, Dnevnik 19, second feature

⁶⁶ TV N1, 31.03.2020, Dnevnik 19, second feature

imply the coverage of a reporter, along with the interviews or feature packs (203). This form was mostly represented on TV N1 (83). Coronavirus and the pandemic in the form of television packs were mostly reported by the RTS (50), while the live coverage from the field was mostly recorded on TV Pink (15).

Graph 11 - Distribution of forms of television reporting, per media outlets



Coverage approach

In as many as 86% of the analysed features, the approach to reporting was **informative** - 106 and 104 features on RTS and TV Pink, respectively, and 114 features on TV N1. This is supported by the fact that as many as 299 out of 376 analysed units on all three TV stations had a direct motive.⁶⁷

The representation of **politicization** within the analysed features is coherent, approximately 10% in all three media outlets, with a different perspective of politicization of the pandemic, embodied in a different attitude towards the authorities, identified in the analysed media outlets. As already mentioned in the examples⁶⁸, the content of TV Pink displays elements of advocacy journalism, which is reflected through the support of government decisions and actions, without questioning them. On the other hand, TV N1 critically reviews the work of state bodies and institutions in the public interest, partially shifting the topic of the pandemic to the political field, or by setting its own work as a central topic within the framework of pandemic coverage⁶⁹. RTS does not question or raise any issue regarding the actions of the authorities in the interest of the

⁶⁷ RTS broadcasted 83% of features that had a clear motive, TV N1 77%, and TV Pink 79%.

⁶⁸ See footnote 64.

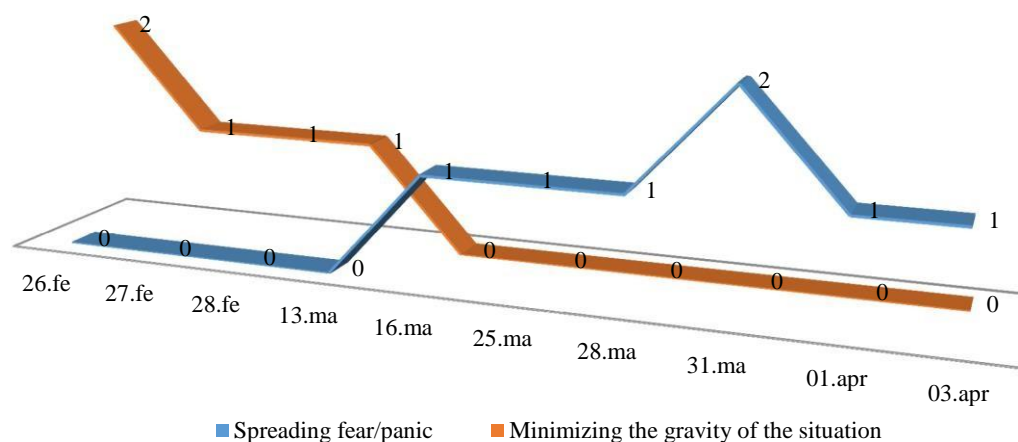
⁶⁹ TV N1, 31.03.2020, Dnevnik 19, second feature

public, offering a wide space to the representatives of state bodies and institutions to express their views and opinions, without any journalistic intervention⁷⁰.

The spread of fear and minimizing of the gravity of the situation were observed on RTS and TV Pink to approximately the same extent. After the first address of the officials regarding coronavirus, on 26 February, these two media outlets participated in minimizing the gravity of the situation in the public⁷¹, while already on 16 March, the first day of the state of emergency, RTS and TV Pink started using the narrative that spread the panic⁷². Both media outlets published one feature each on 26 February and 31 March, while in the meantime one or the other media outlet periodically contributed to minimizing the gravity of the situation, or spreading panic (**Chart 12**).

The coverage contained a **legal aspect** in 8 features (3 by RTS 2, TV N1 and TV Pink, respectively), while **media confrontations** were visible in one feature on TV N1, which presented the conflict between this media outlet and the daily newspaper Kurir⁷³. The dimension of public information, which was discussed within various topics, resulted in 8 features in which the phenomenon of fake news was included in the discourse - 5 features on TV Pink, 2 on RTS and one on TV N1.

Graph 12 - Distribution of features on RTS and TV Pink that spread panic and minimized the gravity of the situation, per days.



⁷⁰ RTS, 21.03.2020, Dnevnik 2, first feature

⁷¹ RTS – 2, Pink – 3 features

⁷² RTS - 3, Pink - 4 features

⁷³ Although the context of media confrontations was recorded in the TV Pink feature (footnote 64), the feature was predominantly oriented towards the political aspect.

Sources

Media content was based on information obtained from official sources in 82%, i.e. 307 features, and the share of official sources is approximately the same in all analysed features (**graph 13**). Most features that rely exclusively on information coming from state representatives (Government of the Republic of Serbia, President and members of the Crisis Management Committee) were registered on TV Pink (79), with additional 24 features with information provided also by other actors. RTS relies only on official sources in 52 features, while in additional 49 there are also other types of sources. TV N1 selected sources in a similar way - 48 features were based on official ones, while several types of sources are noted in other 55 features. Besides, the website of the Ministry of Health Covid19.rs was the source in 49 features⁷⁴.

Healthcare workers appear in a total of 24 features as a source, independently only in 2 TV N1 features, and along with other sources they were identified in 22 features, most often along with official sources (6 features) and beside the patients - citizens (4 additional ones). On the other hand, citizens were represented in 48 features, among which they are the only source in 10 features (5 on TV N1, 4 on RTS and one feature on TV Pink). In 18 features broadcasted on RTS, patients-citizens were one of the sources. There were 14 such features on TV N1 and 6 on TV Pink.

Only one type of source is used in 228 features, most of which are official, 179. The distribution of source types that are used independently in a feature is shown in **Table 10**, while **Table 11** represents the distribution of source types that are used in combination with others.

⁷⁴ As a source, the website covid19.rs is independently listed in 7 features, while 42 contained an additional source, most often official one - in 24 features.

Graph 13 - Distribution of sources per media outlets

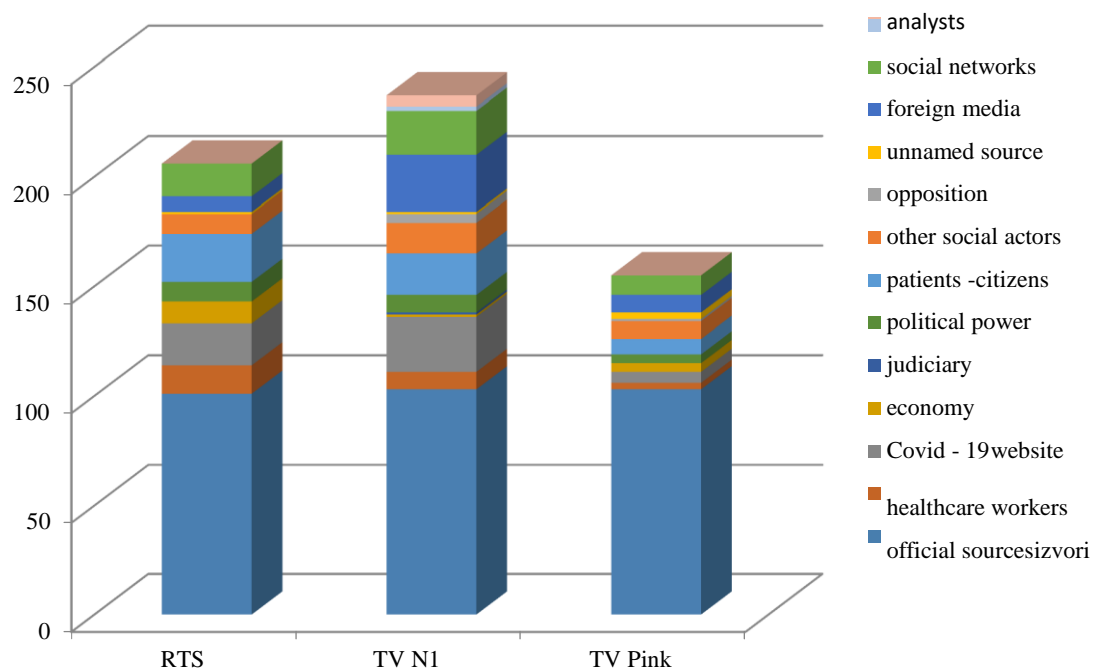


Table 10 - Distribution of features containing only one type of source, per media outlet

Source type/media outlet	RTS	TV N1	TV Pink	total
Official sources	52	48	79	179
Foreign sources	7	2	4	13
Patients - citizens	4	5	1	10
Covid-19 web page	1	4	2	7
Media outlets	0	4	2	6
Other social actors	0	1	3	4
Political authorities	2	0	1	3
Healthcare workers	0	2	0	2
Unnamed sources	0	0	2	2
Economy	1	0	1	2
total	67	66	95	228

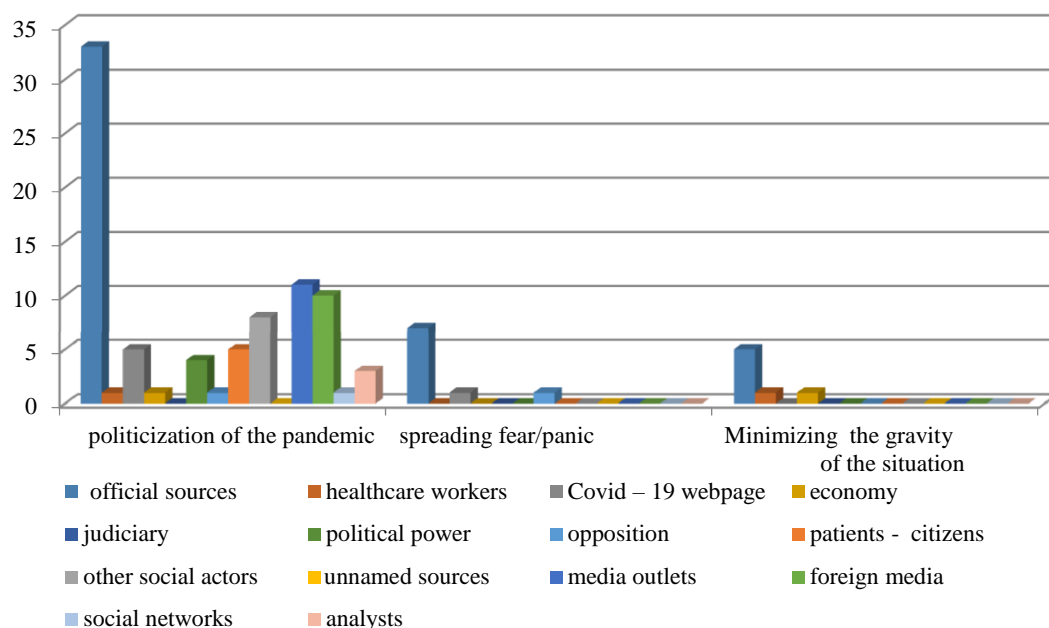
Table 11 - Distribution of source types that are used in combination with other source types, per media outlets

Source type/media outlet	RTS	TV N1	TV Pink	total
Official sources	49	55	24	128
Covid-19 web page	18	21	3	42
Patients - citizens	18	14	6	38
Media outlets	7	22	6	35

Foreign sources	8	18	5	31
Other social actors	9	13	5	27
Healthcare workers	13	6	3	22
Other representatives of political power	7	8	3	18
Economy	9	1	3	13
Opposition	0	4	1	5
Analysts	0	5	0	5
Unnamed sources	1	1	1	3
Social networks	0	2	0	2
Judiciary	0	1	0	1
total	139	171	60	370

When it comes to special results of media work that go beyond the framework of publicly relevant information, the analysis shows the extent to which politicization, minimizing the gravity of the situation and then spreading panic during the pandemic were based on specific types of sources. The officials were the only source in the features that the media outlets politicized in a total of 11 analysed units - 5 on TV Pink, 4 on RTS and 2 on TV N1. Besides, the officials are one of the sources in 22 politicizing features, mostly on TV N1 - 11, then on RTS - 7 and TV Pink - 4. Thus, TV N1 politicized the features mainly by referring to different types of sources, RTS had a similar practice, while the politicization on TV Pink was slightly more based on one, official source. Also, official sources were mostly represented in groups of features that were used by the media outlets to spread panic (7) or minimize the gravity of the current situation (5). As independent sources, they were registered in 2 features on RTS and 3 on TV Pink, which spread panic, while in one feature on RTS and 2 on TV Pink the gravity of the situation was minimized. In the remaining features, they were used in combination with other types of sources.

Graph 13 - Distribution of sources per approaches in all media outlets



Media perception of responsibility for pandemic

In 25 features broadcasted on the analysed television stations, i.e. in 7% of all broadcasted features, the media outlets directly identified the culprits for the spread of the pandemic: citizens (18), returnees from the diaspora (1), the opposition (1) and other social actors (5). For the spread of coronavirus, the analysed TV stations mostly blamed the citizens for indiscipline and irresponsible behaviour, RTS⁷⁵ and Pink in 8 features each, and N1 in 2⁷⁶. Returnees from the diaspora were presented in one RTS feature as responsible for the spread of coronavirus in Serbia⁷⁷, while in one TV Pink feature the opposition actors were presented in that way. Other social actors have been blamed for the spread of coronavirus, mostly in TV Pink features (3)⁷⁸ and in one RTS and one N1 feature.

Presence of actors

The analysis of the content of television features also involved the mapping of three key actors in relation to each feature, dealing with different aspects of the fight against corona virus. Unlike the print media outlets, as part of the research of the sample of media content on television stations, the way in which the actors actively participated in dissemination of information

⁷⁵ RTS, 16.03.2020, Dnevnik 2, first feature

⁷⁶ TV N1, 17.03.2020, Dnevnik 19, first feature

⁷⁷ RTS, 18.03.2020, Dnevnik 2, first feature

⁷⁸ TV Pink, 13.04.2020, Nacionalni dnevnik, first feature

was further analysed by observing whether the actor only presented information related to the pandemic, or either praised or criticized the way the state positioned itself in terms of combating the spread of the corona virus. Also, the actors who were the subject of the features were registered, as well as the presentation of passive actors as: a) the subject of praise; b) the subject of criticism; or c) the actor who was only mentioned. As in the press, a value context (neutral, positive or negative) in which the actor is presented by the media is registered, regardless of his/her function in the text.

Members of the Crisis Management Committee from among the practitioners, representatives of the healthcare institutions of the Republic of Serbia, as well as experts from China who provided support to the healthcare system of Serbia, were represented in 352 features. Within the analysed televisions, the most represented key actor is Dr Predrag Kon, whose presence was registered in 111 features. Dr Kon had an active role in all features that were analysed, among which in 6 articles he praised the official policy of Serbia regarding the suppression of the pandemic, while in one feature he expressed criticism. He is followed by Dr Darija Kisić Tepavčević, who was one of the three key actors in 85 features. In 83 features this actor informed the audience, in one she praised the manner of fighting against coronavirus and in one feature she is only mentioned. The Director of the Infectious Diseases Clinic, Dr Goran Stevanović, was identified in 37 features in which he informed the citizens about the pandemic. The next actor, according to the representation, is the Provincial Secretary for Healthcare Dr Zoran Gojković, who in 9 features praised the actions of state bodies and institutions, while in 19 features he informed the citizens. Dr Branislav Todorović also spoke affirmatively about the measures and decisions of the state in 3 broadcasted features, while in one feature he spoke about omissions within the healthcare system.

The actors from the medical profession had a passive function in a total of 0.6% of all broadcasted features, i.e. they were only mentioned in one feature, in the other they were the subject of praise, and the work of individual actors from the medical profession was not the subject of criticism in any feature.

Table 12 - The role of experts as actors in the features, according to all media outlets

Actor/role	active participation			passive participation		total
	praises	informs	criticizes	mentioned	praised	
Predrag Kon	6	104	1	0	0	111
Darija Kisić Tepavčević	1	83	0	1	0	85
Goran Stevanović	0	37	0	0	0	37

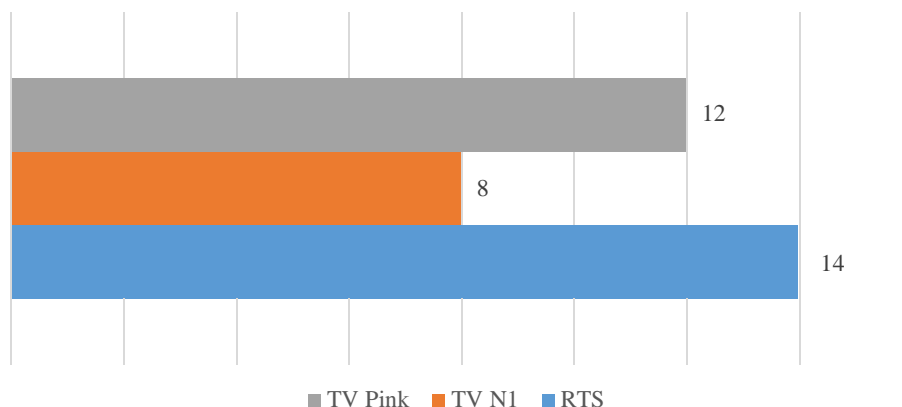
Zoran Gojković	9	19	0	0	0	28
Branislav Todorović	3	16	1	0	0	20
Ivana Milošević	0	15	0	0	0	15
Srđa Janković	0	13	0	0	0	13
Verica Jovanović	0	6	0	0	0	6
Branimir Nestorović	0	4	0	0	0	4
"Chinese experts"	2	2	0	0	0	4
Mijomir Pelemiš	1	1	0	0	0	2
the others	0	24	2	0	1	27
total	22	324	4	1	1	352

This group of actors was represented neutrally in 98% of broadcasted features. Dr Stevanović and Dr Nestorović were each negatively presented in one feature, while Dr Kon and experts from China were positively presented in two features, respectively, while Dr Kisić Tepavčević was positively presented in one (see more about the value context in **Table 18** of the Appendix).

Dr Predrag Kon was mostly audio represented in statements that lasted from 15 seconds to one minute (71 features), mostly on TV N1 - 29, where this actor was also most present in the audio form (43). Those statements are followed by the ones lasting from one to five minutes (29). Dr Darija Kisić Tepavčević was also most represented in statements lasting from 15 seconds to one minute (61).

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, was the most represented among political figures and he was an active actor in 62 features, among which in 34 he praised the work of state bodies in the context of the fight against coronavirus, while in 28 features he informed citizens. He was passivated in 17 features, only mentioned in 12, was praised in 3 (2 on TV Pink, 1 on RTS), and criticized in 4 features - on TV N1.

Graph 14 - Number of features in which Aleksandar Vučić praises state bodies in the context of the fight against coronavirus



Among other actors from the Government of Serbia, the Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar (34) and the Prime Minister of Serbia Ana Brnabić (33 features) stand out according to their representation. In 88% of his appearances, Lončar only informs citizens, while Ana Brnabić in 15% of appearances praises the activities of the state, while in 15 features she informs.

Table 13 - The role of the representatives of the Government of Serbia and the President of Serbia in the features, according to all media outlets

Actor/role	active		passive participation			total
	praises	informs	mentioned	subject to criticism	subject of praise	
Aleksandar Vučić	34	28	12	4	3	81
Zlatibor Lončar	2	30	2	0	0	34
Ana Brnabić	15	15	3	0	0	33
Vlada Srbije	0	1	4	3	2	10
Nebojša Stefanović	1	6	0	2	0	9
Aleksandar Vulin	4	3	0	1	0	8
Vlasti Srbije	0	0	1	2	4	7
Siniša Mali	2	3	0	0	0	5
Rasim Ljajić	0	4	0	0	0	4
Ivica Dačić	0	4	0	0	0	4
the others	0	10	1	2	0	13
total	58	104	23	14	9	208

The media expresses the value context in the central informative shows mostly towards Aleksandar Vučić. As many as 22% of the features positively contextualize the President of Serbia - 11 on TV Pink , 7 features on RTS, while 15% of the features in which Aleksandar Vučić was presented in a negative context were broadcast on TV N1. Also, in 7 features (4 on RTS and 3 on TV Pink), the President of Serbia was presented as a "corona buster". The value connotation was also identified in relation to Ana Brnabić - 4 negatively contextualized features on TV N1, 2 positive on TV Pink and 2 on RTS⁷⁹.

In 57 features related to the pandemic, Aleksandar Vučić was audio represented in shorter intervals from 15 seconds to one minute on N1 (11 features), and evenly on RTS and TV Pink (5 features each). Audio representation lasting from one to five minutes was registered mostly on TV Pink (11), while RTS and TV N1 broadcast 9 such features each. A representation exceeding ten minutes was observed in only one unit of the analysis on RTS. The Prime Minister of Serbia and the Head of the Crisis Management Committee, Ana Brnabić, was

⁷⁹ For the value context of this group of actors see Table 19 in the Appendix.

mostly audio presented in the features lasting from 15 seconds to 1 minute - 20, while the media outlets broadcast 9 features in which the Prime Minister addressed the citizens longer than a minute and less than 5 minutes.

All other socio-political actors were represented in the first two features in 185 appearances, and the most present were foreign ones - the World Health Organization (7 features), Xi Jinping (5⁸⁰), Giuseppe Conte (5) and Emmanuel Macron (4) and "Chinese authorities" (4⁸¹).

It is an indicative finding that citizens were represented in a very small number of headlines on all three TV stations. They were a key actor 24 times on TV N1, 23 on RTS and in 7 features on TV Pink.

Conclusion

The analysis of the press and TV stations in Serbia during the pandemic showed how the weaknesses in journalism and media environment, as well as the lack of democratic capacity adversely affected public information, which is essential for the life of citizens in crisis circumstances. The key deficiencies observed in the analysed press and TV stations media content were embodied in the practice of normalizing the dominance of the political over the medical during the health crisis, i.e. the media outlets did not take into account that the political actors are not competent to interpret the medical aspects of the health crisis. Thus, the interpretation of various aspects of the pandemic was defined by the official point of view, while the voice of citizens and medical workers who fought with the crisis in the field was largely or completely ignored. The media outlets gave more room to officials to promote their work without hindrance, and the room for examination of public policies or concrete actions of state officials in the fight against coronavirus was reduced to a minimum.

On the other hand, reporting on coronavirus situation was fully incorporated into the interpretive structure of each of the media outlets: Radio Television Serbia and the daily newspapers Politika and Večernje novosti provided room for a "state" interpretation of the fight against the pandemic, even when they reported on everyday life during the pandemic, TV Pink and the tabloids Kurir and Informer, on the one hand, explicitly represented the state position in relation to the pandemic, while on the other hand, they gave a lot of room to the key political

⁸⁰ 4 neutral and 1 positively connoted features in relation to the President of China

⁸¹ 3 neutral and 1 positively connoted features

actors of the government to promote their political agendas through the fight against the pandemic. The daily newspapers Kurir and Informer additionally sensationalized this content, which was often the only visible journalistic work. TV N1 and Danas placed the examination of the actions of the authorities concerning the fight against the pandemic in a daily political framework, with TV N1 devoting a significant room to interpreting various aspects of the pandemic in the interest of the citizens. Blic newspaper approached the pandemic within a framework that was adequate to the topic, but for the most part it only communicated relevant information neutrally.

Reporting during the pandemic intensified all the shortcomings of media professional capacity in circumstances when the role of public information is crucial for understanding the overall situation, which makes the daily struggle of citizens with the health crisis more difficult.

Appendix

Table 14 - The role of the representatives of the Government of Serbia and the President of Serbia, as actors in the texts - newspapers

Actor/all media outlets	active participation	passive participation			
	expresses views	mentioned	subject to criticism	subject of praise	total
Aleksandar Vučić	187	31	52	16	286
Ana Brnabić	65	18	9	1	93
Zlatibor Lončar	46	1	4	0	51
Vlada Srbije	10	15	6	6	37
Aleksandar Vulin	21	1	2	0	24
Rasim Ljajić	24	0	0	0	24
Mladen Šarčević	20	1	0	0	21
Ministry of Health	15	4	2	0	21
Nebojša Stefanović	20	0	0	0	20
Siniša Mali	19	1	0	0	20
Ivica Dačić	15	2	2	0	19
Serbian authorities	0	0	12	6	18
Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development	16	1	1	0	18
Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy	7	3	0	0	10
Branislav Nedimović	8	0	0	0	8
Ministry of Defence	8	0	0	0	8
the others	37	15	1	0	53
total	518	93	91	29	731

Tabela 15 – Value context of texts towards Aleksandar Vučić - newspapers

Aleksandar Vučić/media outlet	positive	neutral	negative	total
Blic	0	30	1	31
Danas	0	23	45	68
Informer	9	23	0	32
Kurir	15	35	0	50
Politika	7	41	0	48
Večernje novosti	10	47	0	57
total	41	199	46	286

Table 16 - Value context of texts towards experts - newspapers

Actor/all media outlets	positive	neutral	negative	total
Predrag Kon	4	122	0	126
Darija Kisić Tepavčević	6	83	1	90
Branislav Todorović	0	51	0	51
Zoran Radovanović	1	34	0	35
Goran Stevanović	2	28	0	30
Branimir Nestorović	1	18	5	24
Zoran Gojković	0	16	0	16
Srđa Janković	0	12	0	12
Danica Grujičić	1	7	0	8
"Chinese medical team"	4	4	0	8
Verica Jovanović	0	7	0	7
Mijomir Peleš	0	4	0	4
Tatjana Radosavljević	0	4	0	4
Rade Panić	0	4	0	4
the others	38	141	3	182
total	57	535	9	601

Table 17 - Value context of texts towards the opposition - newspapers

Actor/all media outlets	positive	neutral	negative	total
Dragan Đilas	0	12	23	35
Aleksandar Šapić	0	10	0	10
Boško Obradović	0	5	3	8
Sergej Trifunović	0	8	0	8
Zoran Živković	0	6	1	7
The Alliance for Serbia	0	3	3	6
Zoran Lutovac	0	5	1	6
United Democratic Serbia	0	5	0	5
Boris Tadić	0	5	0	5
Marinika Tepić	0	3	2	5
Vojislav Šešelj	0	5	0	5
the others	0	60	4	64
total	0	127	37	164

Table 18 - Value context of texts towards experts - TV stations

Actor/value context	positive	neutral	negative	total
Predrag Kon	2	109	0	111
Darija Kisić Tepavčević	1	84	0	85
Goran Stevanović	0	36	1	37
Zoran Gojković	0	28	0	28
Branislav Todorović	0	20	0	20
Ivana Milošević	0	15	0	15

Srđa Janković	0	13	0	13
Verica Jovanović	0	6	0	6
Branimir Nestorović	0	3	1	4
"Chinese experts"	2	2	0	4
Mijomir Pelemiš	0	2	0	2
the others	1	26	0	27
total	6	344	2	352

Table 19 - Value context of texts towards the Government and the President of the Republic of Serbia - TV stations

Actor/value context	positive	neutral	negative	total
Aleksandar Vučić	18	51	12	81
Zlatibor Lončar	1	31	2	34
Ana Brnabić	4	25	4	33
Government of Serbia	2	5	3	10
Nebojša Stefanović	0	7	2	9
Aleksandar Vulin	0	7	1	8
Serbian authorities	2	2	3	7
Siniša Mali	0	5	0	5
Rasim Ljajić	0	4	0	4
Ivica Dačić	0	3	1	4
Branislav Nedimović	0	11	2	13
total	27	151	30	208

Case study: The arrest of Ana Lalić

Introduction

This study shows to what extent and in what way the media outlets in Serbia interpreted the case of the arrest of journalist Ana Lalić and how they viewed media rights and freedoms in that context, as well as the social role of the media.

Nova.rs journalist Ana Lalić was arrested late in the evening on 1 April 2020, during the state of emergency imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The reason for the arrest of journalist Lalić was her text entitled *CC Vojvodina on the verge of bursting: No protection for nurses*⁸², published on that day, in which she presented the situation in the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, based on the testimony of medical workers from that healthcare institution. In her text, Lalić pointed out that there was a lack of protective equipment for medical workers in this healthcare centre, which endangered their health and aggravated the already difficult conditions in which they fought for the lives of citizens. Respecting the standards of the profession, the journalist asked the officials of the Provincial Secretariat for Culture and Administration of CC Vojvodina for their statements, in order to corroborate the claims of the unnamed medical workers. The management of CC Vojvodina did not respond to her call, but immediately after the text was published, notified the Prosecutor's Office and the police, claiming that Lalić's announcement disturbed the public. The management then filed criminal charges for the crime of causing panic and disorder, and journalist Ana Lalić was arrested the same evening, and released from custody the next day, on 2 April. Later that month, the criminal charges against her were dismissed.

It is important to note that only a day before the arrest of Ana Lalić, the Government of the Republic of Serbia issued a Conclusion⁸³, fully centralizing the distribution of information, and obliging all relevant actors, including local governments, healthcare institutions and other state bodies in charge of crisis management to submit the information at their disposal exclusively to the Crisis Management Committee, which in this case was solely authorized for their further dissemination. Only a day after the arrest of Ana Lalić, the Conclusion was withdrawn, according to the words of the Prime Minister of Serbia and the Head of the Crisis Management Committee Ana Brnabić, "at the explicit, direct request of President Aleksandar Vučić."

Print media

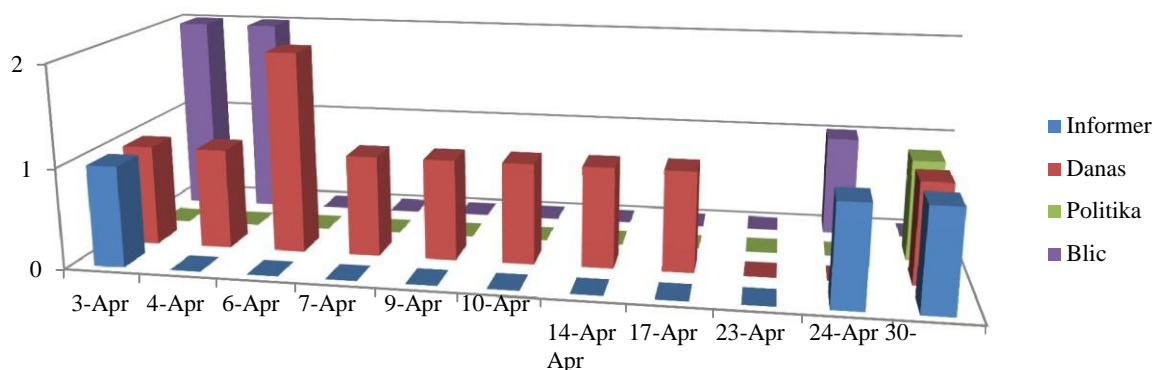
⁸² <https://nova.rs/drustvo/kc-vojvodine-pred-pucanjem-bez-zastite-za-medicinske-sestre/>, the webpage accessed on 27.06.2020

⁸³ Conclusion 05 No. 53-2928/2020

As part of the daily press, 50 texts published in the newspapers Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir, Politika and Večernje novosti were analysed, for the period 1 April - 6 May 2020⁸⁴, which covered this case in various ways. The largest number of texts was published in Danas, and they make up more than half of the sample (28). This paper unequivocally expressed its support for Ana Lalić, advocating that the way she approached the topic contributed to the public learning about information of public importance. The same approach, but with less texts, was registered in the daily Blic (6 articles). On the other hand, Informer (5 texts) and Kurir (7) in their narratives defended the state, which they considered as a kind of target of the attack by the journalist and her text. Politika reported on a small scale (3 articles) in a neutral manner, still expressing to some extent the collegial support to Ana Lalić. Večernje novosti completely ignored this topic, publishing only one sidebar in which Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated her view.

The case of the arrest of Ana Lalić ranged from the informative to highly represented commentary genres, with the latter one making more than a third. Danas, during the state of emergency, published ten comments on this topic in nine different issues, while Blic significantly contributed to putting this topic on the media and public agenda through four comments in two issues, which were published immediately after the arrest of journalist Lalić. This journalism genre opened up room for explicit expression of the views of these two papers in relation to the topic. The comment was a form in which the Informer also expressed the opposite view towards this case (**Graph 1**).

Graph 1 - Representation of commentary newspaper genres by media outlet and date



⁸⁴ From the day the text of Ana Lalić was published on the nova.rs portal, until the state of emergency was lifted.

The daily **Blic** drew attention in the most distinctive way to the long-term consequences that can occur for the entire society if the practice in which the state does not tolerate any criticism from journalists should continue. Blic Editor-in-Chief Marko Stjepanović and his colleagues criticised, in the editorial, the state's repression towards anyone who opposed the dominant narrative ("official source"), pointing to the broadest social consequences of such state practice, but also reminding of the role that journalism and media should have in the society. The editorial staff of Blic concluded the text⁸⁵ by stating: "One of the main consequences of the pandemic, not only for our society but for the whole world, will be the growth of autocratic tendencies in political life, and in Serbia we have seen such populist tendencies among individuals in both government and opposition, even before coronavirus. People will always admire China for the 'firm hand' which crushed the virus, and few will remember that the same 'firm hand' caused the pandemic by arresting MDs and journalists who wanted to alert the international public. Politicians worldwide will try to exploit such sentiment for their selfish autocratic purposes. In our neighbourhood as well, in Hungary, the situation has already taken off. I am sure that as a society we do not want the Hungarian scenario, just as much as the Spanish and Italian ones. Then why is journalist Ana Lalić still in custody while I am writing these lines?" With this text, Blic journalists placed this event in a broader context, explaining how the pressure on journalism could actually lead to a complete collapse of democracy.

In addition to the editorial, journalists Ivan Mrdjen, Žarko Jokanović ("obedient citizen Srba" - 2 comments) and playwright Biljana Srbljanović also expressed their support for Ana Lalić on the Blic pages. The support in 4 texts was directed at her personally, i.e. it was expressed in the context of the act of her arrest, one text included the statement of Ana Lalić, while in 2 articles this daily dealt more with the content of the published text which caused public controversy. In most texts, Blic journalists covered this case in the primary focus, while in two text they discussed it in a broader context of the relationship between the government and the media or through the phenomenon of fake news, taking the position of an advocate for media rights and freedoms.

Immediately after the arrest of Ana Lalić, an editorial was published by the daily **Danas** (Truth is not edited by the Government, on 3 April 2020), which reacted to this case from a slightly different perspective, shifting the focus to the narrow framework of media-government relations in Serbia. In this way, the Danas editorial office did not consider the broader aspect of the role of journalism in the society, which was especially evident in the conclusion of this comment: "It seems, however, that the most important thing for professional journalists with

⁸⁵ *Urgently release the journalist*, Blic, 02.03.2020

integrity is to react 'adequately', with texts that will not be 'edited' by the Government, but by facts. No matter what anyone thought, it could be a crucial message - there is still hope for this society." However, when considering this standpoint of the Danas editorial office, it should be borne in mind that the texts should not be edited by either the "Government" or the "facts", but that the role of the media is to select and interpret the facts according to the only relevant criterion: public interest.

The daily Danas rounded off the whole case and informed the public about the dismissal of the criminal charges by the Novi Sad Basic Prosecutor's Office in an article dated 28 April 2020, *Ana Lalić: Authorities admitted the mistake*.

Although it published most of the texts about Ana Lalić or her work, Danas situated this topic in the primary focus only in 9 texts, in 11 it placed it in a broader context, while it was only mentioned in 8⁸⁶. On the other hand, this media outlet most of all presented the views of Ana Lalić to the readers. She was the interlocutor of the Danas in 6 texts, while in the others she was reported on. Danas, similarly to Blic, mainly focused the texts on the very procedure of arresting the journalist Lalić (19), in 7 it dealt with the consequences of the claims she made in the text, while 2 articles covered her work. In most of the texts, Danas made a critical retrospect of the state's attitude towards media freedom (23), while in other texts (5) it has taken a neutral approach.

The daily **Informer** reacted to the arrest of journalist Ana Lalić with a column by Ivan Radovanović, which fully justified the state's position in this case. Radovanovic expressed understanding for the fact that "the state became fed up", emphasizing that such a reaction happened when "your job is not mere information but some crazy control, interference in politics, determining who should rule and who should not - when, therefore, for days you ride on the back of those who do something, and when you fill in the public with pure poison, then you are, definitely responsible when someone snaps. And it happened last night, when the prosecutor and the police apprehended the 'Nova' journalist, Ana Lalić." The reporting of Lalić was thus perceived as a provocation of the state that led to the arrest, and the Informer continued to report on the topic in this manner⁸⁷.

In all 5 published articles, Informer journalists expressed unequivocal support for the state and the government, and the mentioned column was the only text in which this topic was in

⁸⁶ Example: mentioning the topic during the interview with the president of the Movement of Free Citizens Sergej Trifunović, If the opportunity creates a thief, a state of emergency creates a dictator, Danas, 21.04.2020

⁸⁷ We've reached the breaking point, Informer 03.04.2020.

primary focus. However, the texts in which this topic was registered in a broader context⁸⁸ are also very indicative. In two texts, news about the release of Ana Lalić and the decision of the competent Prosecutor's Office to drop the criminal prosecution were published in the sidebars of texts that were critical of the leader of the Freedom and Justice Party Dragan Djilas, that is, the case of Ana Lalić was placed in the context of the opposition. In the sidebar in which the information on the dismissal of the criminal charges was published, the Informer was extremely critical of the decision (*Scandal! The Prosecutor's Office has given up, Ana Lalić will not be held accountable for fake news*, Informer, April 28, Djilas' supporters provoke conflicts in the middle of the outbreak!). Sidebar in the text dated 03.04.2020 - *Journalist released even though she spread fake news*: "Ana Lalić, a journalist of nova.rs portal, who was apprehended on Wednesday night in Novi Sad and who was detained for 48 hours on the Prosecutor's Order, was released yesterday morning, although it was proven that she spread false news and tried to cause chaos!" was extremely similar to the beginning of the text published on the same day in Kurir⁸⁹.

The analysed texts in the Informer mostly deal with the claims made by Ana Lalić in her text, without ever asking her to make a statement or clarify the allegations. By contrast, in their narrative they sought to defend the authorities from fellow journalists.

In the initial report, the newspaper **Kurir**, like other pro-government media, did not reconsider the official position that Ana Lalić was spreading fake news, but used that claim to argue the state's action, i.e. her arrest: "Nova S portal journalist, Ana Lalić, was apprehended on Wednesday night in Novi Sad **for disseminating incorrect information** about the work of the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina and **spreading panic**, but she was soon released from custody, despite the fact that she was **proven to have disseminated fake information!**" Although she was initially detained for 48 hours on suspicion that she could repeat the crime of publishing texts that cause panic, she was released immediately on Thursday." The subtitle of the text was: **Verified** Medical supplies provided already in January⁹⁰. The interlocutor in this text was the Provincial Secretary for Health, Dr Zoran Gojković, who defended the position of the state. By introducing an actor from the "profession" who was critical of Ana Lalić's text, Kurir tried to

⁸⁸ Beside the mentioned texts, two columns were published by Dragan J. Vučićević and Ivan Radovanović.

⁸⁹ Kurir, 3 April 2020, Journalist released from custody even though she lied, see text on p. 5 and 6

⁹⁰ A journalist was released from the custody despite the fact that she had lied, Kurir 03.04.2020.

discredit her work. However, Ana Lalić's opinion was not asked for in any of the texts, although Kurir journalists criticized her personally (two articles), the statements from the text that was the subject of public controversy (4) and linked her to other media actors and the opposition (one text)⁹¹.

Further, Kurir tried to contextualize the writing of Ana Lalić within professional ethics. In an article called "analysis", it interpreted the circumstances under which her text was written and placed it within the framework of the Code of Journalists of Serbia. Although it is stated that the text was written, as they stated, "without the intention to judge", it still abounds in allegations that Lalić violated the Code⁹². In so doing, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the Kurir is a daily newspaper which, according to the Press Council, violated the Code 1106 times in the second half of last year⁹³.

Politika reported on the case in a relatively neutral tone, but still pointed to key arguments that could challenge the state's actions. It is especially important that the topic was initially viewed from different angles, as well as that relevant interlocutors and body of information were selected for the text, explaining the essence of the problem that the journalist encountered in her work: "the criminal charges against the journalist were filed by the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, which published a denial on its website the same evening the text was published. However, as can be seen from the text, they did not comment on the preliminary journalist's call, when they were asked to do so. This emphasized the problem journalists are facing - lack of understanding of the representatives of state authorities and institutions of their duty to communicate with journalists and respond to their questions in the public interest."⁹⁴ Politika also included Lalić's statement in this text. In addition to the mentioned text, Politika also published a column by Boško Jakšić mentioning this case, as well as a separate news item about the dismissal of the criminal charges against Ana Lalić.

TV stations

When it comes to TV stations, it is noticeable that in this part of the media scene there is a clear affiliation regarding the case of Ana Lalić, which represents a reflection of specific editorial policies of public media services, commercial media outlets with national frequency TV Pink and cable channel TV N1. Also, the attitude towards this case clearly indicates how each of these media outlets perceives its own role in the public sphere.

91 Most of the texts were written in the primary focus (4), while in three they were discussed more broadly.

92 *Journalist knowingly lied*, Kurir 07.04.2020

93 http://www.savetzastampu.rs/latinica/uploaded/szs_monitoring_jul-dec_2019_V1.pdf

94 *A journalist was interrogated for causing panic*, Politika, 03.04.2020

Among the mentioned, the public media service dealt with the case of Ana Lalić to the smallest extent (only 3 items) and only immediately after the arrest, which is especially problematic considering that RTS has the greatest responsibility and obligation to deal with issues of public interest. In only three features in Dnevnik 2, on 2 and 3 April, the case of Ana Lalić was discussed, and this journalist was not actively present in any of the features, nor was her position presented in any way. Ana Lalić was mentioned for the first time in the central news show of RTS on 2 April, in the seventh minute, as part of the report from the press conference held after the meeting of the Crisis Management Committee in the Palace of Serbia, where Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić spoke.

RTS introduced this topic by paraphrasing the journalistic questions asked during that conference, and the only position expressed on this issue was that of Vučić. Namely, at the very beginning of the feature, the journalist did not explain the reason for Ana Lalić's arrest, but only quoted Vučić's statement that "he is sure that there is enough equipment in the CC Vojvodina", after which she additionally "pointed" that "this journalist wrote the complete opposite, that this clinical institution lacks equipment." The feature within the same programme, with more info about the arrest, more precisely about the release of Ana Lalić, was broadcast in the 33 minute of Dnevnik 2. In no segment of this feature did the RTS journalists clearly explain the reason for the journalist's arrest, nor did they open the issue of media rights and freedoms and the importance of reporting in a situation such as a pandemic. In contrast, the only interlocutor in the feature, which lasted a total of 61 seconds, the Provincial Secretary of Health, Dr Zoran Gojković, made claims that were contrary to the allegations in the text, which were not even stated in the feature. Therefore, RTS did not refer to the content of the text at any time, but only gave room for reaction to the official source.

It is especially interesting that this feature was inserted between the feature in which the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić talked about the annulment of the Conclusion⁹⁵ of the Government of Serbia, which provided for the centralization of information, and, on the other hand, the feature in which the Acting Director of the CC Vojvodina Dr Edita Stokić and a doctor from the same clinical center, Dr Nataša Gović Perić, extensively explained that the situation in that healthcare institution was very good, which was illustrated by Reuters footage.

The next day, Dr Zoran Gojković spoke again about the situation in the CC Vojvodina, with the support of the Prime Minister of Vojvodina Igor Mirović, but RTS viewers did not

⁹⁶ Please see the footnote 6

receive a more detailed explanation of what was stated in the text by Ana Lalić in this feature either.

With such reporting, RTS completely neglected all aspects of media rights and freedoms, as well as the existence of a possible problem in the CC Vojvodina, which were issues of interest to the entire public. In contrast, the only interpreters of the situation that RTS recognized as relevant were the President of Serbia and provincial political officials.

Unlike RTS, TV Pink explained in detail that Lalić was "apprehended in Novi Sad for fake information", as well as that she "published incorrect information that the CC Vojvodina lacks equipment and functions in chaos". In addition, this TV station reported that "the journalist never tried to justify the placement of fake information before the investigative bodies", without stating the source of this information. As a counter-argument to the text published on nova.rs, the TV Pink presenter read the state of the inventory of the CC Vojvodina. The next feature in the same programme consisted of reading a column by Ivan Radovanović from the daily *Informer*, which was already mentioned in this analysis⁹⁶, while the third segment of this programme, covering the case of Ana Lalić, was a broadcast of the address by officials from the Palace Serbia. The last part of this programme was a guest appearance by a member of the Crisis Management Committee, Dr Branimir Nestorović, and a "marketing expert" Nebojša Krstić, who during his speech tried to discredit journalists as "unfortunates who come to conferences to argue", calling them "fake media outlets, some three or four letters" and explained that those were people "scraped from the bottom of the barrel, amateurs and ignorants but politically passionate, with some task and political mission aimed at disrupting that community of Vučić". He, with the approval of the journalist who hosted the conversation, assessed that by arresting Ana Lalić the state was "fighting against fake news".

By obtaining the right to a limited national resource (frequency), TV Pink is subject to a number of obligations defined by the legal framework. The information can hardly be assessed as impartial and complete when the reporting implies: disrespect for the presumption of innocence, additional accusation of Lalić and insults against her and nova.rs during the news *Nacionalni dnevnik*. This is especially important if we take into account the fact that the media outlet did not allow Ana Lalić to express her view within the same programme.

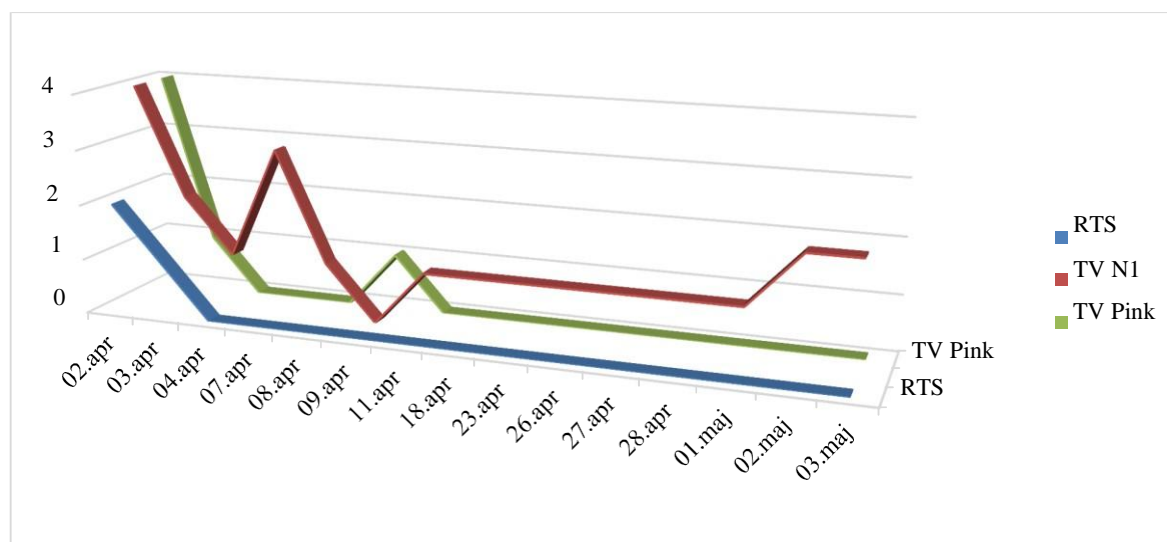
TV N1 had a completely different approach in reporting on this topic, i.e. it was the only one to shift the focus from the position of the state to the event (arrest), the text that encouraged the CC Vojvodina to file criminal charges, but also a broader aspect of media freedom. Also,

⁹⁷ Please see the footnote 6

TV N1 was the only one to take into account the perspective of the journalist herself, further personalizing the whole case. Although the view of the officials is represented in the N1 features with the statement of Dr Zoran Gojković and the direct broadcast of the press conference of the Crisis Management Committee and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, the criticism of the state's action is evident. In the continuation of the same programme, this TV station gave room to international entities (European Commission, OSCE, Amnesty International) as well as domestic associations of journalists who condemned all forms of repression and supported the freedom of the media. Considering the fact that nova.rs and TV N1 are part of the same umbrella company United Media, as expected, special room was given to the journalists of the portal where this text was published.

In the following period, TV N1 continued to keep this topic relevant on the media agenda, while RTS completely and TV Pink mostly stopped mentioning this topic. Also, in this period, TV N1 first personalized the case of the arrest of Ana Lalić, shifting the focus from the state, judiciary and media to her personal struggle for media freedom, and due to the way TV N1 treated the topic she became symbol of that fight as well.

Graph 2 - Distribution of analysed features per media outlet and date.



Conclusion

As the case study showed, dailies with different editorial policies approached the interpretation of the arrest of journalist Ana Lalić in accordance with their understanding of media freedom. The specific approach is visible both in the reporting and in the commentary statements published in the press. Blic has greatly contributed to placing this topic on the media agenda with impressive comments which, above all, shed light on the broader context of the problem of arresting a journalist - the importance of the journalism and its importance for the democracy. Danas daily, by frequently publishing texts about the arrest of Ana Lalić, most intensively kept this topic present in the public space, narrowly focusing the problem of media freedom towards the relationship between the state and journalism. The tabloids Informer and Kurir placed the observed case within the framework of a (constructed) conflict between the state and journalists, in which they positioned themselves as representatives of the state and government, with Informer basing its position on "defending" the state from provocative attacks by unsuitable journalists, while Kurir directed its blade towards criticizing journalists' work from an "ethical point of view". Politika and Večernje novosti reported the least on the case of the arrest of Ana Lalić. Politics approached this topic neutrally, considering several angles and aspects, but did not keep this case relevant to the public for a long time. For Večernje novosti, the arrest of the journalist was regarded as news, since this case was recorded in only one sidebar.

When the reporting of the three TV stations is compared, three completely different approaches can be established concerning the treatment of the case of the arrest of Ana Lalić. RTS provided the public media service space to official sources, which shaped the picture of the whole case. The approach of this media is characterized by the absence of journalistic work, which is reflected in the selection of all relevant information significant for the citizens. Such an approach resulted in the distortion of the image presented to the citizens, which, consequently, sent the wrong message to the public about the role of the media in a society.

With its work that can be characterized as advocacy journalism, TV Pink has completely taken the position of the state, thus completely moving away from the social role of the media. One-sidedness and passion are key characteristics of TV Pink's reporting, which can be seen in the direct condemnation of Ana Lalić's work and the efforts to discredit her, her work and the work of the media outlet in which she is employed. In that way, TV Pink directly contributes to further endangerment of media rights and freedoms in Serbia.

TV N1 significantly contributed to the case of the arrest of Ana Lalić being viewed in a more comprehensive way, pointing out to the different dimensions of this problem, which is the expected role of the public service, which RTS did not fulfil. With its reporting, TV N1 kept this topic in the focus of the public, by continuously drawing attention to the unacceptability of such practices, as well as to the importance of the existence of free and independent media.

The publication of the text, the arrest of Ana Lalić and the subsequent events were the subject of diverging journalism, which consequently provoked a broad public debate in the direction of freedom, i.e. instrumentalization of the media, as well as the capacity and manner in which the state is fighting the coronavirus pandemic. The interpretation of this topic in the media outlets is largely a reflection of the state of the journalism in Serbia, relations within the community, the place of journalism and the media in relation to the state and political structures in Serbia.