Center for Civil Communications

Monitoring of the media reporting on corruption in Macedonia

– Results, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations –

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INTRODUCTION

"Qualitative, independent media reporting on corruption can play an important role in pressuring the government to act in the public interest. By drawing the attention to behavior that is generally perceived as acceptable and exposing such behavior as corrupt, media can raise public awareness, activate anticorruption values and generate outside pressure from the public against corruption."

Susan Rose – Ackerman, Yale University, 1999

Corruption is one of Macedonia's key problems, which undermines the rule of law, decreases the efficiency of the public administration and reduces the citizens' trust in the institutions. A number of reports and assessments of relevant international institutions and organizations (the EU progress report of the Republic of Macedonia (2008), the Annual Report of the State Department of the USA on human rights practices in the Republic of Macedonia (2008), Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank (2009), etc.) point to the widespread corruption in the country and the still inefficient fight against it.

The media are a powerful weapon in the fight against corruption throughout the world. They have a dominant influence on creating the perception of corruption in the society and the attitude of the authorities towards corruption – whether they tolerate it or fight against it.

Through a professional and quality reporting on corruption, the media contribute to increasing the pressure of the public on the holders of the publicly awarded power to demonstrate transparency, accountability, and responsibility, to increasing the awareness of the harmfulness of corruption, and to exerting pressure on the authorized institutions in order to take measures for solving cases of corruption.

The fact that it concerns a low-risk, high-profit activity in which it is in the mutual interest of the participants to keep silent about the act – contributes to the widespread corruption and the difficulty of the media to obtain information which can expose or prove a case of corruption. Hence the need for greater persistence and thoroughness in researching these cases.

Of course, to what extent the media will truly play the role of controllers of the corruption depends on the political, economical, and legal ambience in which they act. The main factors that determine the efficiency and success of the media in their fight against corruption are the freedom of speech, access to information, ownership, competitiveness, credibility, and availability of the media.

The still insufficient capacity of the media and journalists in Macedonia for discovering and researching corruption is one of the key problems pointed in the State Program for Prevention and Repression of Corruption. In order to overcome this problem, the program points to "conducting an analysis for the media oversights, preparation of training programs, as well as investigative journalism training." It is in this direction that the Center for Civil Communications undertakes activities for strengthening the role of the media in the fight against corruption.

According to the research conducted in 2006 as part of the PACO-Impact project, when asked to whom they would report a case of corruption, the majority of the Macedonian citizens, despite not believing entirely in the objectivity and independence of the journalists, still responded that they would turn to the media since they consider them "to be a powerful force and to have influence on the public opinion." Thus, it is clear that in the fight against corruption, the country has to work on strengthening the role of the media in terms of increasing their ability for objective and independent reporting on corruption.

The activities for "strengthening the role of the media in the fight against corruption" of the Center for Civil Communications aim to enhance the journalistic standards for reporting on corruption and to strengthen the capacity of the media for fulfilling their role in the fight against corruption. This in-depth analysis of the writings on corruption in the media represents a starting point, so that the weaknesses are detected and concrete recommendations are offered for improving the journalistic and media standards.

The Center for Civil Communications was established in 2005, as a non-governmental, non-partisan, and non-profit association of citizens, which focuses its activities on anticorruption in two key mutually related directions. The first deals with discovering corruption practices and suggesting measures and policies for eliminating corruption. The second concerns supporting and enhancing the media for a more efficient realization of their role in the fight against corruption.

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METHODOLOGY

The articles on corruption published from January 1 to December 31, 2008 in five daily newspapers ("Dnevnik", "Vecer", "Vreme", "Utrinski Vesnik", and "Fakti" [1]) were subject to direct monitoring. The object of analysis as part of this research were the total results of the monitoring, not the results of any separate newspaper.

The monitoring included articles that referred to corruption, corruption practices, accusations and allegations for corruption, abuse of public means, as well as the undertaken anticorruption measures, activities, and policies. The monitoring was conducted in the period from January to May 2009.

The published articles and their contents, among other things, were analyzed from the following aspects:

- The page on which the news article was published;
- The size of the news article;
- The announcement of the news article on the front page;
- Illustrations of the news article;
- The author of the news article;
- The genre of the news article;
- The number, status, formality, and location of the news article sources;
- A fair and balanced approach;
- The occasion for the news article;
- The area in which the corruption example appears;
- The act of corruption;
- Possession of documents and evidence to confirm the corruption,
- Affiliation of the perpetrator of corruption (current of former government).

The research and monitoring pattern were fashioned in a manner in which they could provide an answer to the following key questions:

[1] The monitoring of the "Fakti" newspaper was done in the period from January 1 to March 31 2008, due to inaccessibility of the archives of this newspaper for the remaining monitoring period.To what extent is the reporting balanced and objective and are all sides of the story consulted?

- To what extent do the Macedonian media report on corruption?
- Are the basic professional standards in journalism upheld in the process of reporting on this topic?

- Are the news articles in this area instigated by independent and original research of the journalists or are they merely reports on events organized on this topic?
- To what extent do the news articles contain the elements: authenticity, relevancy, trust, and credibility?
- How much do the media realize their role of government controllers when they report on corruption?

Bearing in mind the extent, scope, and manner of the monitoring, this constitutes the only one of its kind, as well as the most thorough and comprehensive monitoring ever conducted in the country, which offers relevant quantitative and qualitative indicators of the manner in which the media inform about corruption.

Mr. Mihajlo Lahtov, Mrs. Vanja Mihajlova, and Ms. Antoaneta Ivanova participated in creating the methodology for this research and in training the monitors. The monitoring was conducted by the students Ms. Natasa Jordanova, Ms. Elena Petkovska, Ms. Ivana Sokolovic, Ms. Monika Risteska, and Mr. Zamir Mehmeti.

RESULTS OF THE MONITORING

- In the period from January 1 to December 31, 2008, in the five daily newspapers included in this monitoring, a total of 1039 news articles on corruption were published, which means **an almost daily presence of corruption as a topic in the media.**
- **The biggest number of the news articles on corruption (43%) were included in the "Crime section",** which is typically in the middle pages of the newspapers, while a significantly smaller number of the news articles were published in the other sections, which were in the first pages of the newspapers. This is directly related to the occasion for the articles, bearing in mind that in the section "Crime" the most common articles are in some way initiated by an event linked to the police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the courts, etc. Regardless of the different title and arrangement of the sections in the monitored newspapers, the remaining part of the articles are mostly published in the sections "Macedonia" (26%) and "News" (10%), in which short reports prevail, which again corresponds to the genre the articles belong to.

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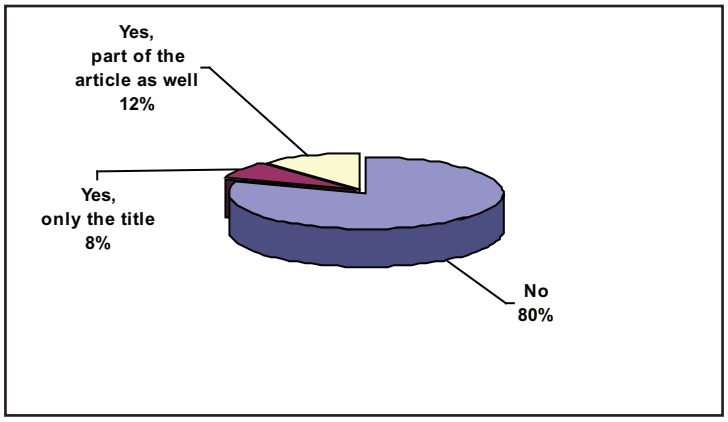
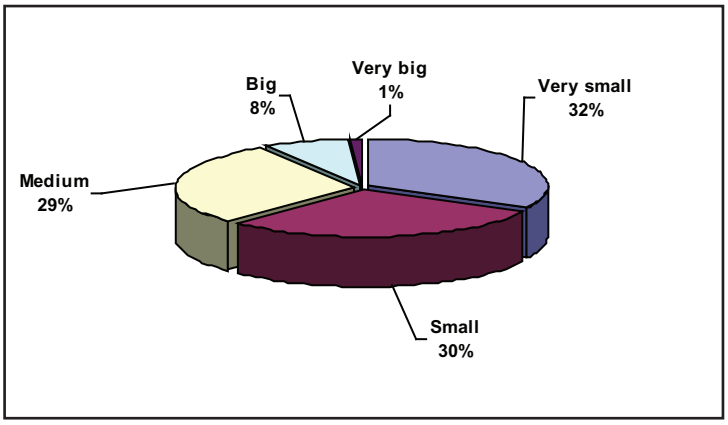
- **The articles on corruption most often (80%) are not published or announced on the front page.** In a small number of cases (8%) only the title is announced or, alternatively, in addition to the title, part of the article on corruption features on the front page (12%).

Picture 1. Announcement of the article on the front page



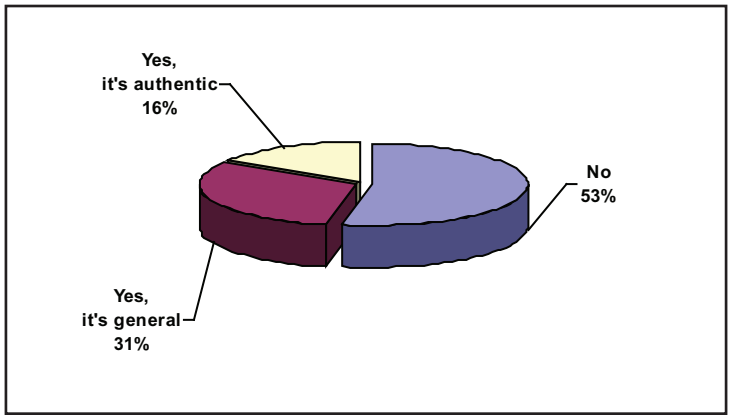
- **In terms of the size of the text, the small articles dominate (62%)**, which points to the fact that they mostly concern publishing news or news stories, while only in a small number of cases, they concern analysis, journalistic research, etc.

Picture 2. Size of the article



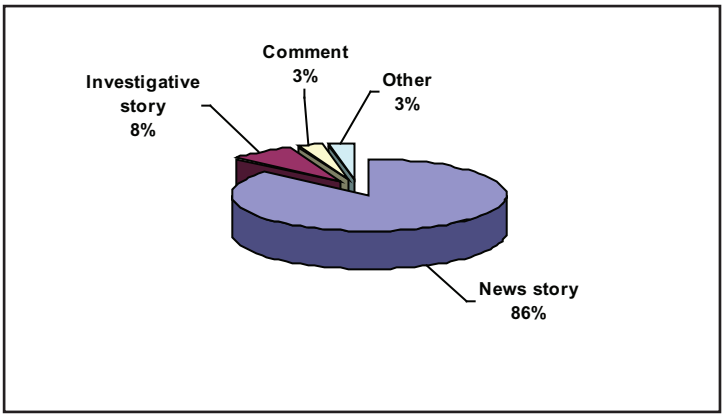
- As far as photographs (illustrations) are concerned, **articles without photographs (53%) or a general (theme) photograph (31%) prevail.** A significantly smaller number of the articles (16%) are illustrated with an original (authentic) photograph.

Picture 3. Does the article contain a photograph?



- According to the genre the news articles belong to, corresponding to the size of the articles, **the reports/news (86%) as opposed to the investigative stories (8%),** comments, analysis, interviews, etc. **dominate.**

Picture 4. The genre of the news article.



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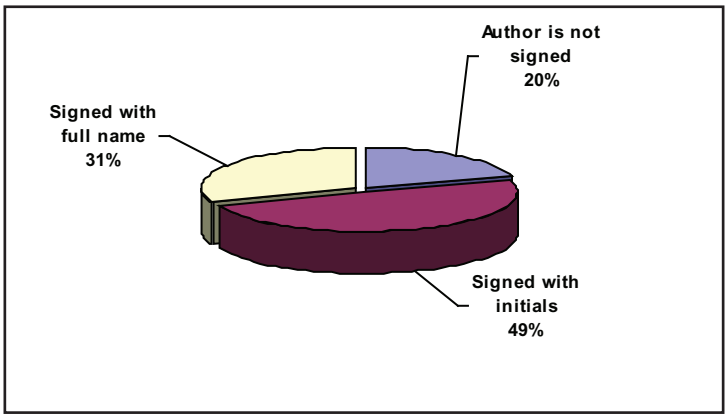
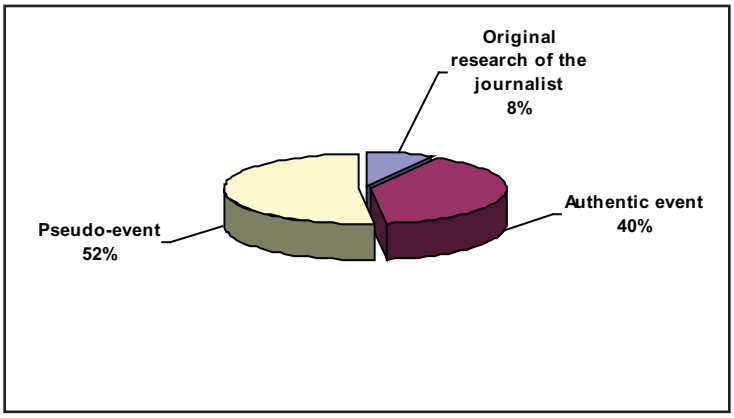
- **In as much as half of the articles on corruption, the journalist is signed only with his/her initials (49%),** and there is also a great number of articles in which the journalist is not signed at all or they are taken from other sources such as news agencies, a fully published press releases, etc. (20%). In only less than a third of the articles (31%), the journalist is signed with his/her full name.

Picture 5. Authenticity of the news article



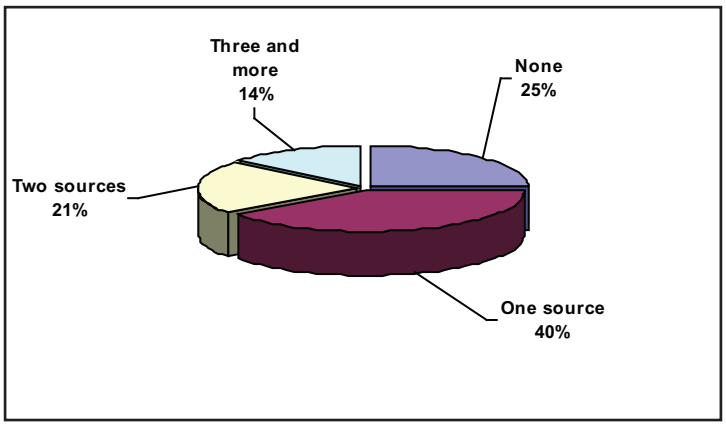
- **Only in an exceptionally small number of cases (8%) the occasion for the news article was an original research of the journalist.** As opposed to this, there is a prevalence (92%) of authentic and pseudo-events as reasons for the articles on corruption (a news conference, a statement, a press release, a plenary session, etc.).

Picture 6. Occasion for the news article



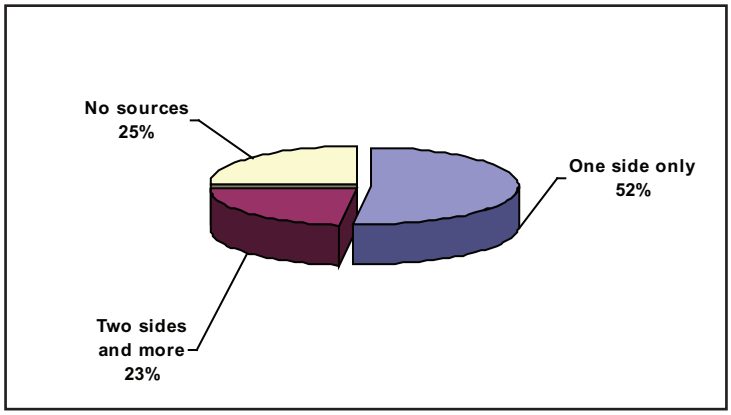
- In terms of sources, **one quarter of the news articles on corruption (25%) do not have stated sources,** while a high 40% of the news articles have one source of information. Regarding the location of the sources, the Ministry of Internal Affairs leads as an institution (14%).

Picture 7. Number of sources



- **More than half of the news articles (52%) present only one side of the story.** Two or more sides of the story were consulted or stated in 23% of the news articles, while in 25% of the news articles none of the sides of the story was consulted.

Picture 8. Sides of the story



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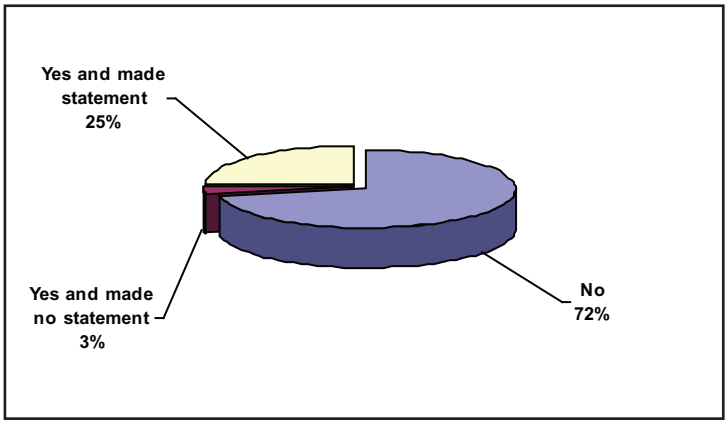
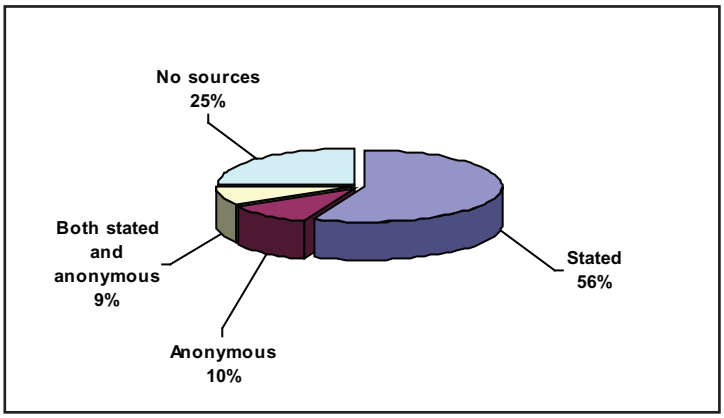
- **In a dominant number of news articles (72%) the perpetrator of the corruption was not consulted and was not asked to make a statement at all.** He was consulted and made a statement in 25% of the cases, while in a very small number of cases (3%) the perpetrator of the corruption was consulted, but made no statement.

Picture 9. Was the perpetrator of the corruption consulted?



- **More than half of the news articles (56%) contain stated sources,** while a small number (10%) contain anonymous or both stated and anonymous sources (9%). In this case as well a high 25% of the news articles contain no source whatsoever.

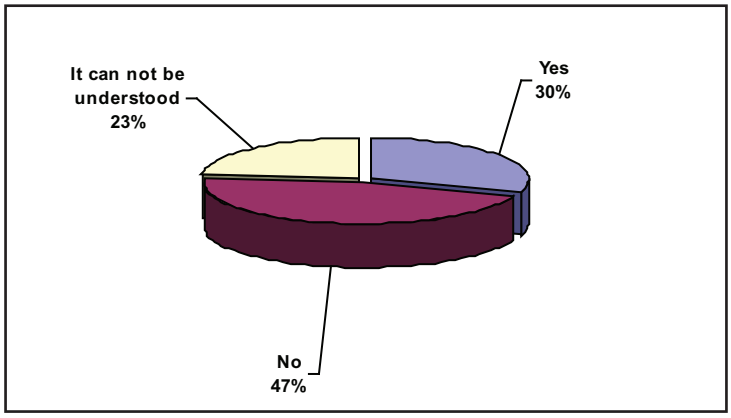
Picture 10. The status of sources



- **In nearly half of the news articles (47%) it is understood that the journalist neither possesses nor has seen any evidence (documents) to confirm the**

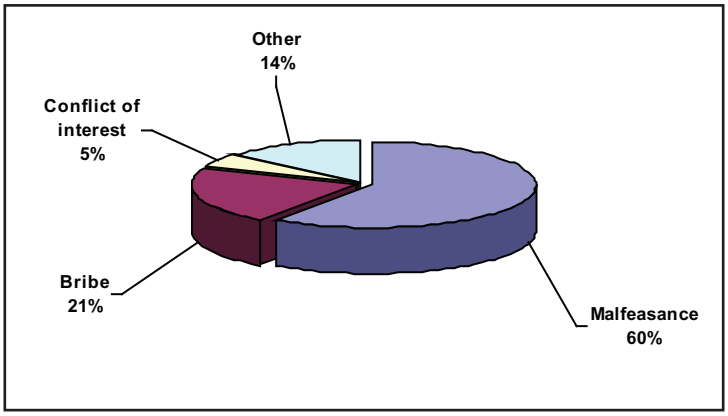
corruption. That such evidence exist can be understood in less than a third of the articles (30%), while in 24% of the news articles it can not be understood whether the journalist possesses or has seen any evidence or not.

Picture 11. Possessing documents/proof of corruption



- In the biggest number of cases, **an act of corruption constitutes malfeasance of the perpetrator (60%),** but the act of bribe is also significantly present (21%).

Picture 12. Act of corruption



- **Nearly half of the news articles refer to corruption in the central government institutions (27%) and the local municipalities (22%),** while less of them refer to the other public administration institutions (7%), the health care (5%), the judiciary (4%), the education (3%), etc.

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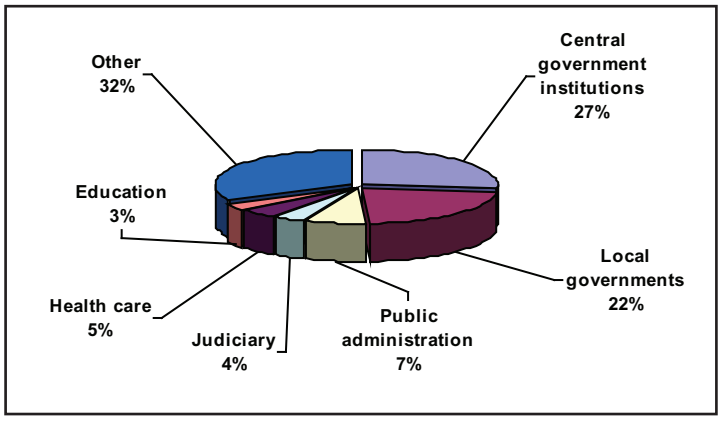
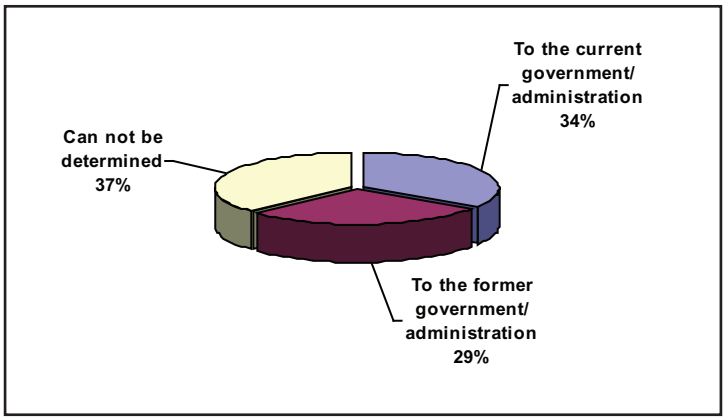
Picture 13. Area of corruption



- **Almost a third of the news articles on corruption refer to representatives of the current (34%) and the former (29%) government or administration,** while in almost the same number of cases (37%), one can not derive from the news article to which government the perpetrator of the corruption belongs to.

Picture 14. Origin of perpetrator of corruption



CONCLUSIONS

The results of the monitoring and the analysis of the way in which the media inform about corruption point to the general conclusion that **the media in Macedonia do not fulfill their role in the fight against corruption** and there is still plenty of room for enhancing the professionalism and the manner of reporting on corruption.

The key flaw of the current reporting of the media on corruption, from a professional standpoint, is **the lack of respect for the basic professional standards in journalism.** In a large number of the news articles sources are missing, as well as fundamental journalistic principles, such as a fair and balanced approach.

In addition, what is surprising is **the insufficient presence of investigative journalism** in this area, as the almost only way to discover and disclose corrupt activities, which, in the nature of things, do not wish to be disclosed; thus, it is necessary for the media to invest additional efforts to expose them. The problem becomes more serious if we bear in mind that this conclusion stems from a monitoring which was conducted on printed media, which by definition should offer more investigative and analytical news articles. On the other hand, deprived of such vital information, the public (citizens) can not reach relevant decisions for important issues concerning their private, professional, and social life.

Bearing in mind that, on the one hand, there are a lot of news articles on corruption, while on the other hand they are not grounded on journalistic research and are not processed in-depth and analytically, but rather initiated by the organs of government, it can be concluded that in the public there is an impression that the media have the freedom to openly inform about corruption without any pressures, whereas, in fact, **they create a distorted image of the problems with corruption in Macedonia.**

This general assessment stems from the following conclusions of the monitoring:

- **Corruption is present as a topic in the Macedonian media,** which means that they are interested in writing and publishing news articles related to corruption and in this way satisfy the interest of its audience about this topic.

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- The exceptionally small number of news articles instigated by information that the journalist arrived at through an original and independent research and, on the other hand, dominant number of news articles instigated by some event (arrest, trial, press release, news conference, etc.), point to the conclusion that **there is a lack of investigative journalism in this important area, which leaves a broad room for the abuse of the media by the "creators" of such events. In this way, the media do not fulfill their role as government controllers.**

- The correlation between the small number of news articles on corruption that originate from independent and original research of the journalist and the news articles published or at least announced on the front page, points to the conclusion that **the media would have more news articles to publish on the front page if they had more independent and original research.** In addition, if the media had more of their own research and analysis on corruption, they would be able to publish these news articles on the first couple of pages, instead of the so far dominant publishing in the "Crime" section.

- The fact that there is a prevalence of short news and reports points to the conclusion that **the topics related to corruption are dealt with superficially and informatively, without deeper, more comprehensive and more detailed analysis and research,** i.e. only as presenting news from some event.

- **The news articles on corruption suffer from a lack of authenticity, relevancy, trust, and credibility,** since for the greatest part they are not signed by the journalist who is the author of the article, they have no authentic (original) photograph from the claim or the act of corruption, nor do they offer any evidence or proof for the allegations for corruption. This is one of the most serious remarks of the monitoring, as it points to an insufficiently serious approach of the media to the huge problem of corruption in Macedonia.

- The fact that a large number of the news articles on corruption have only one source, consult only one side of the story and do not consult the person suspected of corruption, i.e. **the fact that journalists take the statements of those who create the events without a gain of salt, again testifies to an unprofessional approach and leaves a broad room for abuse and manipulation of the media.** Reporting in this way, the media do not implement in their work some of the basic professional standards in this area: a fair and balanced approach to the participants in the story, which means consulting all sides of the story and their balanced, i.e. unbiased treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and conclusions of the monitoring, the Center for Civil Communications proposes the following recommendations for enhancing and strengthening the role of the media in the fight against corruption in Macedonia:

- **The media should continue to report on corruption on a daily basis, but with application of the techniques of investigative journalism and with greater usage of the possibilities the new technologies offer.** Bearing in mind that the participants in the corruption have a mutual benefit, and thus a mutual interest to keep silent, it is almost impossible to reveal cases of corruption without application of the investigative journalism techniques.

- **The media, i.e. their editors and owners, should support and encourage the investigative journalism a lot more** as a proven effective tool in the fight against corruption in the country, whereby, ultimately, the credibility, popularity, and profit of the media are directly increased. By increasing the number of investigative stories about corruption, **the media would be able far more to announce the investigative stories on the front pages and the headlines,** thus further increasing their popularity, and, consequently, their audience.

- **The media should direct more resources (people, equipment, etc.)** to investigative research and reporting on corruption, as well as to use more the available (international and domestic) funds for supporting investigative journalism.
- **The media should invest in enhancing the skills and knowledge of their journalists, support and encourage their participation in trainings for investigative journalism** and for discovering and reporting on issues related to corruption.

- **The media should use more often the legally guaranteed protection** from pressures, threats and blackmailing for a more professional, independent, and objective investigating and informing about corruption. According the Law on prevention of corruption “any force, prevention, or influence in another way over the media to announce or not to announce information on cases of corruption is forbidden”. Furthermore, the journalist is given the right to unobstructed access to

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all sources of information, in compliance with the law. The same law stipulates that "no one may exclude the public from the hearing for corruption before a competent body or juridical person, except for a preliminary procedure proclaimed as a secret."

- **Whenever possible, the media should support and encourage the practice of signing the news articles on corruption with the full name and surname of the journalist – author of the article,** which would increase the authenticity of the articles, the personal credibility of the journalists, as well as the credibility and the relevance of the media and the trust in them, which in turn signifies a bigger audience. On the other hand, the unsigned articles on corruption leave a room for doubting the accuracy and authenticity of the claims, as well as the honesty of the medium's intentions or of some of the sources for publishing the article.

- **The journalists should strive a lot more to consult the participants in the corruption, all the mentioned or concerned parties in the story, as well as to attempt to procure and offer evidence to prove the claims and accusations for corruption.** In this respect, the media should use far more the legal provision for protection of the sources of information, which stipulates that "no one may ask a journalist who has announced information on a corruption act to reveal the source of information, except in a procedure before a court." On the other hand, not consulting the suspects in a case of corruption can mean abuse of the medium. In this case, the law stipulates that "anyone announcing information on somebody's corruption is obliged to respect the presumption of innocence and the principles of true, objective, and impartial informing, as well as other principles of the code of professional ethics." Likewise, "no one may use the media for false accusation of somebody of corruption." In addition, when publishing news articles on corruption in the future, the media should take care to uphold at least the minimum standards of their profession – publishing facts, consulting all sides of the story and giving them equal treatment.

- **The media should abandon the practice of publishing news articles on corruption without a single quoted, stated, or consulted source.** In addition, one of the fundamental journalistic rules should always be taken into consideration – the journalists are the ones who relate the facts of the story, while the sources relate their attitudes, opinions, feeling, etc.
- The media should be more restrictive towards the "blind" and superficial covering of events of corruption and **the journalists should strive to verify the information**

obtained at the events and use them as an occasion for further investigation and analysis. Otherwise, the media expose themselves to the danger of serving as a means of advancing someone's private, party, and business interests.

- **The news articles on corruption should be accompanied more often with authentic, instead of general and thematic photographs and illustrations,** thus increasing their authenticity, relevancy, credibility, and trustworthiness. The photographs, as well as the written part of the article, are a very important element which complements the story and increases its appeal, especially in this era of wide availability of interesting contents all around us.

- **The journalists should broaden the list of sources of information on corruption,** not depending merely on the state institutions (the police, the courts, the prosecutor's office, etc.). In this respect, it is necessary when reporting on corruption to seek sources of information in order to access more in – depth into discovering the reasons and the system problem that created the preconditions for corruption in the corresponding area.

- **The journalists should use more intensely the information and experience of the authorized institutions for fighting against corruption** (The State Anti – corruption Commission, The State Audit Bureau, The Financial Police, The Agency for Prevention of Money Laundry, etc.)

- **The media should consider employing legal advisors** who would help the journalists with their news articles on corruption, enabling them to discover as much information as possible, while at the same time not leaving room for any lawsuits against the journalists and the media. In media who already have jurists, all that is necessary is their greater involvement in terms of checking the news articles from the standpoint of respecting the law regulations.

- **The media owners should provide full legal protection of their journalists in the court cases against them** due to published articles on corruption. In this way, the journalists would be more encouraged to research and report on corruption, feeling secure that the medium is behind them and abandoning self - censure, which is the result of fear that in case of a lawsuit, they would have to bear any sentences themselves.

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