

LOCAL JOURNALISM AND AUDIENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA DURING THE PANDEMIC CAUSED BY THE CORONAVIRUS^{2,3}

Abstract. *The Coronavirus outbreak started in 2019, in the city of Wuhan in central China, right before it spread to the whole world. In such crises, the media have a very big role in society, and local media are important to inform citizens on a daily basis about events from the immediate environment. The study explores whether citizens living in the south of Serbia believe that local journalism is necessary and whether they are interested in local news, especially local news related to the coronavirus pandemic. In the research, we tried to determine how the citizens of southern Serbia evaluate the reporting of local media when it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, whether they consider reporting as objective and professional, but also if they notice omissions in the area of violating privacy in journalistic writing about the pandemic. The results show that the citizens of southern Serbia are interested in local news, as well as in news related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Also, the results indicate that the citizens of southern Serbia are informed through local media about important local topics, and especially about the facts and events related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Based on the obtained results, we have determined that the citizens of southern Serbia evaluate the reporting of the local media on the pandemic caused by the coronavirus as other important events reporting as objective and professional. The results also indicate that the citizens of southern Serbia do not notice omissions in journalistic writing about the pandemic caused by the coronavirus in the area of endangering the right to privacy, such as sensationalism, reliance on unverified sources, use of photographs without permission, and similar unethical practices.*

Key words: *local media, pandemic, coronavirus, journalism, the role of media, south of Serbia, audience*

1. Introduction

The relation between the audience and the local media is examined on a daily basis, especially in times of great crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic that broke out in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in central China and soon spread to the whole world. The role of the media in such emergencies when the lust for

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information about a new and unknown threat to human life is great is reduced to the central role of the media defined by France Vreg: “Mass communicators (as professionals) collect information, create it into messages, communicate it to mass audiences through communicative activities and enable understanding of events in society and the world” (Vreg, 1991: 51).

A state of emergency was declared on March 15, 2020 in Serbia, due to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Crisis communication during the coronavirus pandemic in the Republic of Serbia was often characterized by closed institutions, so that the media could not obtain relevant information. This is evidenced by the fact that the Government of Serbia stopped updating the coronavirus data only four days after publishing the first information on the number of people tested positive for coronavirus in municipalities (Kojić, 2020).

In addition to institution closures, the information problem grew when some media started spreading unverified information. Also, privacy is questioned in crisis situations, and this is shown by the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. This is confirmed by the author Jelena Kleut, who researched how the media in their reporting on the coronavirus treat the personal data of citizens (Kleut, 2020: 5).

In this study, the theoretical framework is based on the theory of uses and gratifications. The theory of uses and gratifications proves to be adequate in audience research when the motives for reaching for a certain type of content are clear, which is undoubtedly the case when it comes to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus or some other major crisis situation. (Kedžo, 2015: 32-33).

The study examines whether the local media in Serbia represented to citizens of southern Serbia an important and credible news source about the coronavirus pandemic, especially during the outbreak and virus spreading in Serbia, and whether citizens noticed the violation of ethical rules in the field of privacy protection.

2. Methodology

The research objective is to determine whether the citizens of southern Serbia are interested in local news, and especially whether they are interested in news related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. The research objective is to examine whether the citizens of southern Serbia are informed through the local media about important local topics, and especially about the facts and events related to the coronavirus pandemic. The research objective is also to establish how the citizens of the south of Serbia evaluate the reporting of the local media on the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, as well as other important events, whether they think that the reporting is objective and professional. The research objective is also to examine whether the citizens of southern Serbia notice omissions in journalistic writing about the pandemic in the field of endangering the right to privacy, such as: sensationalism, reliance on unverified sources, use of photographs without permission and similar unethical practices.

Hypotheses to be tested:

- 1) Citizens of southern Serbia are interested in local news, and are especially interested in news related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus.
- 2) Citizens of southern Serbia are informed through the local media about important local topics, and especially about the facts and events related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus.
- 3) Citizens of southern Serbia evaluate the reporting of the local media on the pandemic caused by the coronavirus and other events reporting as objective and professional.
- 4) Citizens of southern Serbia notice omissions in journalistic writing about the pandemic caused by the coronavirus in the field of endangering the right to privacy, such as: sensationalism, reliance on unverified sources, use of photographs without permission and similar unethical practices.

An online survey and in-depth interview will be used to test the hypotheses in this study.

3. Research results

3.1. Audience on the local media reporting of the coronavirus pandemic

A total of 158 correctly completed questionnaires were received. The online survey was conducted in the period from February 8, 2021 to February 18, 2021 over the social network platforms Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The first group of questions referred to the respondent data in which there were six questions. Out of the 158 responses that researchers received, 77 respondents (48.7%) were female and 81 respondents (51.3%) were male. Most answers were given by those respondents aged from 19 to 29 and there were 93 of them (58.9%), followed by 28 people (17.7%) between 30 and 39 years of age. Fewer answers were given by persons between 40 and 49 years of age – 23 (14.5%), and 12 respondents (7.6%) were those between 50 and 59 years of age. Only 2 respondents (1.3%) were under the age of 18, and no one (0%) over the age of 60 completed the survey. The majority of people – 68 (43%) who filled out the survey were from a small town (less than 100.000 inhabitants). There were 65 respondents (more than 100.000 inhabitants) from a larger city (41.1%), and 25 from the village (15.9%). When it comes to the region, the largest number of respondents – 78 of them (49.4%) were from the Pčinja district, followed by the Nišava district – 65 of them (41.1%), and there were 9 (5.7%) respondents from Jablanica district, 5 (3.2%) from the Pirot district and one (0.6%) respondent from the Toplica district. When it comes to education, the most of respondents were college educated – 52%, there were others with a high school degree – 35.4% and 10.1% with a master/specialization degree. There were 1.9% of respondents with a doctorate, and only one respondent completed the primary school

(0.6%). Out of the total number of persons who participated in the survey, the largest number were employed (57.6%), followed by the unemployed participants (17.7%). Slightly fewer respondents were those who were primarily dedicated to studying (17.1%), and the fewest of them were seeking employment (7.6%). There were no answers from retired respondents (0%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Data on respondents

Total sample	158	
Gender	Male	81
	Female	77
Age	Under 18 years of age	2
	19-29	93
	30-39	28
	40-49	23
	50-59	12
	Over 60 years old	0
A place of residence	Larger city (more than 100.000 inhabitants)	65
	Smaller town (less than 100.000 inhabitants)	68
	The countryside	25
Region	Nišava district	65
	Pčinja district	78
	Pirot district	5
	Toplica district	1
	Jablanica district	9
Education	Primary school	1
	High school	56
	College/faculty	82
	Master's / specialization	16
	Doctorate	3
Job	Employed	91
	I'm looking for a job	12
	I'm not looking for a job, but primarily dedicated to studies	27
	Unemployed	28
	Retiree	0

3.2. Audience interest in local news

Questions from the second group are related to respondents' interest in local news. When asked "how often do you follow local news", 55 respondents (34.8%) answered "occasionally", 53 respondents (33.5%) answered that they often follow local news, while 27 respondents (17.1%) rarely followed this content. If we compare the sum of those respondents whose answer was in some way affirmative and who occasionally, often or always followed local news with respondents who rarely followed local news, we can see that 131 respondents (82.9%) were more interested in local news as opposed to 27 (17.1%) survey participants who rarely followed this content.

When asked “which local media do you follow”, where respondents could mark more than one answer, 132 respondents (83.5%) answered that they followed the online media *Južne vesti*. *Niške vesti* is followed by 49 respondents (31%), and immediately behind them was *Radio Han*, followed by 45 respondents (28.5%). The online media *Jugmedia* is followed by 33 people (20.9%), and *Info Vranjske* by 32 respondents (20.3%). There were 17 respondents (10.8%) who followed *City Radio*, 23 respondents (14.6%) watched *Belle Amie TV*, while 14 (8.9%) watched *Zona Plus TV*. Ten respondents (6.3%) followed the *Niš TV*, and 9 of them followed (5.7%) *Kopernikus TV* and 31 respondents (19.6%) answered that they followed other media.

When it comes to the time that respondents spent daily following the local media, the most answered that they followed the media for less than an hour – 63 (39.9%). Slightly fewer respondents – 59 (37.3%) answered that they did not follow the local media every day, and 26 (16.5%) that they followed it for an hour. Ten respondents (6.3%) said they spent several hours during the day following the local media. According to the results, most respondents followed the local media on a daily basis - 99 (62.7%).

When it comes to the local community, the respondents were mostly interested in the field of society (37.3%), then politics (13.9%), and they were equally interested in culture (11.4%) and sports (11.4%). The percentage of respondents who answered that they were interested in the field of entertainment was 5.7%. The same number of respondents were interested in Covid-19, health (4.4%) and economics (4.4%). 3.9% of respondents were interested in chronicles, and 2.5% of respondents were interested in technology, while 5.1% of respondents were interested in the second area. The society section often covers other areas. This means that many news items that correspond to some other sections in their content, in most cases can be part of the society section. This also applies to news of a coronavirus pandemic. Although the virus appeared in March 2020 in Serbia, many local media still did not have a column “coronavirus” or “covid”, so all topics related to this area were classified as society topics.

The last question from this group was about the frequency of following the news about the consequences of the pandemic, where 50 respondents (31.6%) answered that they followed the news very rarely, while 45 (28.5%) pointed out that they followed the news about the corona pandemic several times a week. This news is followed by 31 respondents on a daily basis (19.6%), and 17 of them (10.8%) followed several times a month. 13 respondents (8.2%) followed once a week, and two respondents (1.3%) followed once a month. The sum of respondents interested in pandemic news, no matter how often they followed it, was much higher than those respondents who rarely followed the news - the total number of people who followed pandemic news several times a week, once a week, once a month, and every day is 108 (68, 4%). That percentage was more than twice as high as respondents who rarely followed the news of the corona pandemic.

3.3. Local media as sources of information on important topics

The frequency of reliance on the local media when it comes to information on important local topics showed that the majority of respondents - 53 (33.5%) occasionally followed this news, then 41 respondents followed it often (25.9%), slightly fewer - 39 participants (24.8%) followed rarely, and 25 respondents (15.8%) answered that they followed it always. The obtained results showed that, when it came to important local topics, the local media played a big role. The total number of respondents who occasionally, often, and always relied on their local media and through whom they were informed about important local topics is 119, which was a significantly higher number compared to those respondents who rarely used the local media for information on important topics.

When asked which media they followed the most often related to important local topics, respondents had the opportunity to choose multiple answers. Most respondents opted for the online media *Južne vesti* – 127 (80.4%), 40 survey participants followed *Radio Han* (25.3%), and 36 (22.8%) respondents read the online media *Niške vesti*. 29 respondents (18.4%) followed *Info Vranje*. 28 respondents (17.7%) opted for some other media that were not offered, and the online media *Jugmedia* was followed by 23 respondents (14.6%). Respondents followed *Belle Amie TV* less, 19 of them (12%), then 8 respondents (5.1%) watched *Zona Plus TV*, while 7 respondents (4.4%) watched *Niš Television*, and the same case is with *Kopernikus TV*, which is also followed by 4.4% of respondents. The minority of respondents – 6 (3.8%) – followed *City radio*.

When asked how important the topic of the coronavirus was for the local media reporting, 65 respondents (41.1%) answered that it was not very important to them, a bit fewer – 43 of them (27.2%) said that it was very important, and for 25 respondents (15.8%) it was irrelevant. For 14 survey participants (8.9%) the topic was of little importance, and for 11 of them (7%) it was of very little importance. If we add up the number of respondents to whom the topic is unimportant, little important and very little important, we get a total number of 50 respondents who did not think that the topic of coronavirus was so important for reporting. On the other hand, a total of 108 respondents believed that it was important for them that the local media reported on the epidemic caused by the coronavirus.

When asked if they started following some local media just because they provided the information about the pandemic, 140 respondents (88.6%) gave a negative answer, and 18 of them (11.4%) started following some local media for that reason.

During the previous year, 47 respondents (29.7%) followed the ‘society’ topics in the local media, 29 participants (18.4%) on ‘politics’, 21 respondents (13.3%) opted for ‘sports’, and 17 of them (10.8%) opted for the section ‘Covid19/health’. 10 (6.3%) respondents followed ‘culture’, another area not listed by 9 (5.7%) people and 8 (5.1%) survey participants followed ‘crime’ sections. There were 7 respondents (4.4%) who followed ‘economy’ and the same number of respondents 7 (4.4%) followed ‘entertainment’. Only 3 participants (1.9%) opted for ‘technology’.

Almost one third of the respondents followed the ‘society’ section in the past year, so that area was at the top when it comes to the interest of the survey participants. The area of ‘Covid 19/health’ came fourth. As we mentioned earlier in this study, most local media published topics about coronavirus in the society section.

3.4. How do respondents evaluate local media reporting?

The fourth group includes questions related to the assessment of local media reporting given by respondents. When it comes to reporting about important topics in local media, most respondents – 55 (34.8%) rated local media reporting with a score of 3, then 53 (33.5%) with a score of 4, while 24 respondents (15.2%) rated it with 5. Grade 2 was given by 18 respondents (11.4%) and only 8 participants (5.1%) reported the lowest grade of 1. The results showed that most respondents believed that local media reporting about important topics was very good. Almost the same number of respondents gave a grade of 3 and 4, which were high grades, followed immediately by respondents who believed that this reporting was at the highest level (grade 5). A very small number of survey participants considered reporting to be at the low level, as a total of 26 respondents gave grades 1 and 2. Reporting by the local media during the coronavirus pandemic was assessed by 106 respondents (67.1%) as objective, 52 respondents (32.9%) thought that reporting was biased. 104 (65.8%) respondents answered that the local media reported on the coronavirus professionally, while 54 survey participants (34.2%) answered that the local media reported unprofessionally on this topic. Reporting of the local media about events related to the coronavirus pandemic was assessed by the majority of respondents with a grade of 4 – 60 of them (37.9%), and a score of 3 was given by 43 respondents (27.2%). Twenty respondents (12.7%) opted for grade 2, and the same number – 20 of them (12.7%), gave the maximum grade of 5. The lowest grade 1 was given by the minority of respondents – 15 of them (9.5%). Previous data on the objectivity and professionalism of local media during the coronavirus also confirmed the assessments given by the respondents to the local media when it came to their reporting about pandemic-related events. Thus, most respondents rated the reporting of local media with a high score of 4, followed by grades 3 and 5. The total number of respondents who gave grades from medium to high is 123 (77.8%). Only 35 (22.2%) respondents rated local media reporting on the pandemic on a scale of 1 and 2.

3.5. The right to privacy during a pandemic and local media: an audience perspective

The fifth group of questions focuses on the extent to which the local media respect the right to privacy during pandemic reporting. When asked how much the respondents trusted the local media, 48 respondents (30.4%) answered that they were not sure, 47 of them (29.7%) that they largely trusted their local media, while the trust in the local media of 34 (21.5%) survey participants was small. 27 respondents (17.1%) trusted the local media to a very small extent, and only 2 survey participants (1.3%) trusted the local media to a very large extent. The results showed that almost a third of respondents largely trusted the local media.

Information from the local media was periodically checked by 57 respondents (36.1%) and rarely checked by 46 of them (29.1%). A bit fewer – 29 respondents (18.3%) often checked information, 18 of them (11.4%) never checked, while the number of those who always checked that information was 8 (5.1%). The results showed that a minority of respondents always checked the information published by the local media.

When asked how the media reported on the corona pandemic, 110 respondents (69.6%) believed that reporting was ethical and 48 of them (30.4%) believed that the media reporting was unethical. The local media rarely endangered the right to privacy in reporting during the coronavirus pandemic – as stated by the most of the respondents – 61 (38.6%), then 49 respondents (31%) believed that this right was occasionally violated, and 29 respondents believed that it never happened (18.3%). Fourteen respondents (8.9%) believed that local media often endangered the right to privacy, and 5 survey participants (3.2%) claimed that this always happened.

According to the majority of respondents, the reporting of local media during the pandemic was ethical. This was because most participants responded that local media rarely endangered the right to privacy when reporting on a corona pandemic.

To the fifth question from this group on the media report during the coronavirus pandemic – 83 respondents (52.5%) answered that they reported without sensationalism, and 75 respondents (47.5%) thought that they reported with sensationalism. Although there was little difference, most respondents believed that the local media did not report in a sensationalized way during the pandemic.

100 respondents (63.3%) answered that local media used verified and unverified sources during the coronavirus pandemic reporting when invading privacy. A significantly smaller number of respondents – 34 (21.5%) answered that the media used only verified sources, while 24 (15.2%) believed that they used unverified sources. During the coronavirus pandemic reporting, the local media used both licensed and unauthorized photographs when invading privacy according to 100 respondents (63.3%). Furthermore, 45 of them (28.5%) believed that the media used only photos with permission, and 13 respondents (8.2%) believed that the media used photos without permission.

3.6. The relation between the local media and the audience in the era of the coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of a journalist: the case study of “Južne vesti”

In this study we will use the in-depth interview with the editor-in-chief of the local online media from Nis, “Južne vesti” Gordana Bjeletić, to present the journalist-audience relation through analysis. The interview was held on March 12, 2021 in Nis. It was recorded and transcribed.

Gordana Bjeletić, editor-in-chief of the local online media “Južne vesti”, confirmed that the audience was very interested in the local news and that people followed them because they were the most important to them. People were especially interested in local news in emergency situations, which was the case with the

pandemic caused by the coronavirus, so the number of visits to the site exceeded the number of inhabitants in Niš. The number of website visits on a monthly basis was in the range of one hundred thousand to 2 million.

When it comes to the most read areas of these local media, society and crime sections stand out. However, Gordana Bjeletić believed that the current events were the most read at that time, regardless of which section they were in. Among other current events, the pandemic caused by the coronavirus topic has been constantly current since last year, and it had the highest readership. Thus, Gordana Bjeletić pointed out that readers were “very interested” in topics related to the coronavirus and in the beginning, when the epidemic broke out, the most read topics were the interviews with doctors and epidemiologists, as well as all information that was practical and useful – from examinations to tests, all the way to information on vaccinations and measures. The least read texts, when it comes to the coronavirus, were those in which statistical data on the number of patients and covid-related deaths were published.

What is currently most interesting to the audience, our readers, are the measures. Since that is constantly changing now, these texts are really the most read and they come back there, the same readers check several times a day to see what places are open, in that sense the corona is still the most read topic ... but they are still the most read texts, it was about the virus earlier, what it was, how to protect people, and now about the measures, how people behave, what they are allowed to do on which day, what they will do which day and that is what is most read on the site.

As Gordana Bjeletić points out, the first topic on the site of “Južne vesti” for the first two months after the outbreak of the pandemic was the corona. Even today, this media reports on the pandemic on a daily basis and in addition to topics dealing with problems, the reporting was also focused on positive examples, on people who tried to help others or do something good in challenging circumstances. To help the public, these local media introduced, in addition to the “Report a problem” application which existed before the pandemic, another application in which citizens could call and point out problems during the pandemic. Dozens of messages from citizens arrived every day. They also achieved interaction with their audience through numerous surveys that were part of the texts, and there was also interaction on social networks. According to Gordana Bjeletić, the email of the editorial office and emails of journalists are available to the public, which can be found on the website.

My impression is that during the pandemic, we crossed a certain border between the media and the readers, a kind of human relationship was created, a closer relationship between us. Readers turned to us as friends, as someone who could help them. We received hundreds of messages and calls daily.

The interactivity with the audience of these local media also influenced the fact that during the pandemic, in addition to informing the public, it had another socially important role, and that was the role of contributing to the visibility of the problems that people had. The biggest problem of the citizens at the beginning of the epidemic was that they did not know what the procedure was if someone got the virus, because

the organization of health institutions, as Gordana Bjeletić states, was at a very low level. Initially, there were phone numbers that people with symptoms could call, but the typical response given to callers was to stay home and take care of themselves. Bjeletić says that the biggest problem was that there were no hospital capacities, and the institutions ignored the problems of the citizens, so the media could not get any information from the Clinical Center in Niš.

I can talk for a long time about how many specific problems we have solved; I remember a few cases. One day, two people told us that they had pneumonia and that they received treatment instructions. However, they were sent home from the hospital. We published the text and literally after about thirty minutes, both patients were admitted to the hospital. And now, on the one hand, it was very nice and we were pleased about it, but what about those people who did not call “Južne vesti” and who were not admitted to the hospital?

Health institutions in the south were completely unavailable for providing information during the emergency situation in Serbia, which is why “Južne vesti” hired a correspondent from Belgrade to follow the conferences of the Republic crisis headquarters in order to inform the public. Gordana Bjeletić stated that the Clinical Center in Niš, as the largest health institution in the south of Serbia, to which more than 2 million people were referred, did not publish any information during the state of emergency, so she said that the institutions completely failed during the pandemic and adds that the information system was centralized.

The institutions treated the citizens of this country in the worst, most inhumane way, because they literally hid from them the information that meant life at that time. In the beginning, you really couldn't get any basic information, we found ourselves in a very big problem, because you must not spread panic, you must not make it difficult for people who are in a difficult situation in that way, you must calm people down. On the other hand, you have institutions that are silent, that people don't know; people had nowhere to go for an examination, they were dying at their homes, the official numbers of people dying were hidden, people were left without advice, without an idea of what they could do.

Reporting has to be at a high level and not deviate from the Code of Journalists of Serbia, so Gordana Bjeletić, editor-in-chief of “Južne vesti”, pointed out that they did not spread panic, and that they published only one misinformation. Then they conveyed the call of the authorities that everyone who had symptoms caused by the coronavirus should call a doctor immediately, but no one answered the phone numbers given by the authorities. Reporters maintained their professionalism by asking questions every day, even when the institutions were closed, so a lot of information was missing, but readers on the site of “Južne vesti” could always find what was missing and why it was missing. Representatives of the Clinical Center in Niš finally held the first press conference since the beginning of the pandemic in July 2020, after a letter signed by most journalists from the south of Serbia.

Citizens were also a very reliable source of information for “Južne vesti” during the pandemic, but the editorial office checked every information received.

In addition to the fact that citizens and readers were the source of information, their reaction to the reporting of these local media was positive, and in many situations, according to Gordana Bjeletić, they provided support to “Južne vesti”. She described reporting during a pandemic as a huge learning process, in which, as in any other reporting, only ethical reporting was allowed. On the site of “Južne vesti”, readers could not come across inflammatory rhetoric and headlines, catastrophic statements and unverified warnings. Gordana Bjeletić provided an example of receiving information from a doctor that the “Italian scenario” was happening in Niš, but since he did not want his name included in the statement, after consulting with people dealing with ethics, “Južne vesti” did not want to publish that text and spread panic. According to her, they showed through other topics that there is a problem, and forced the authorities to react in some way.

We respected the Code even when the authorities did not respect it. We had a minister who spoke about some other diseases of the deceased doctor from Niš and we did not convey that. We literally had to act like a corrective agent and be highly aware of the problem all the time, because the situation required it. You can't be relaxed while there is a state of emergency around you and that's why I have that kind of positive feeling and somehow, I think it's an ugly situation, but there is a level of satisfaction in that sense because we didn't give up, we even raised the standard at that time.

When they reported on the citizens, Gordana Bjeletić, the editor-in-chief of “Južne vesti”, said that they absolutely protected their privacy, and when it came to their audience, she thought that the audience trusted their reporting during the pandemic.

I don't think we intruded on anyone's privacy at all. When people lose someone, when they are in such a terrible situation, they become vulnerable and they might say more than they should. It is your obligation as a journalist to exclude such things and other personal information which would leave them completely exposed. In order to write only what is important for the situation and what is important for the public, you must never cross that line.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results obtained by the survey of 158 participants, the first hypothesis was confirmed which stated that the citizens of southern Serbia were interested in local news and that they were especially interested in news related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. The results of the online survey showed that respondents relied on local media when it came to important local issues, and that local media were important to them when reporting on a coronavirus pandemic, which confirmed the second hypothesis that citizens of southern Serbia were informed through local media about important local topics and especially about the facts and events related to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Based on the fourth group of questions, where respondents rated the local media reporting, which

is very well evaluated according to the results, we could conclude that the citizens of southern Serbia evaluated the local media reporting of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as other important events, both objectively and professionally, so the third hypothesis was also confirmed.

Analyzing the results of the online survey, we found that most respondents believed that local media reporting during the pandemic was ethical, and even when the media intruded on privacy. Thus, this study refuted the fourth hypothesis that citizens of southern Serbia noticed omissions in journalistic writing about the coronavirus pandemic in the field of endangering the right to privacy, such as: sensationalism, reliance on unverified sources, use of photographs without permission and similar unethical practices.

When we compare the data from the in-depth interview with the editor-in-chief of the local online media “Juzne vesti”, Gordana Bjeletić, with the analyzed data obtained from the online survey, we get a more complete picture. According to the results of the online survey, the citizens of southern Serbia were interested in local news and news about the coronavirus pandemic, as confirmed by Gordana Bjeletić when she said that the audience followed the local media; it was especially interested in information related to the coronavirus pandemic which was documented by the fact that this news was most read on the local media website. Also, the citizens believed that the reporting of the local media during the pandemic was professional and objective, as well as the daily reporting and great effort to get official information, as confirmed by the example of “Juzne vesti”. Gordana Bjeletić also testified about the protection of citizens’ privacy and respect for the Code of Journalists of Serbia and ethical norms in reporting during the pandemic, emphasizing that the protection of those rights and norms was the guiding principle of the local media whose editor-in-chief she was.

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LOKALNO NOVINARSTVO I PUBLIKA U REPUBLICI SRBIJI U VREME PANDEMIJE IZAZVANE KORONA VIRUSOM⁴

Apstrakt. *Pandemija izazvana virusom korona izbila je 2019. godine u gradu Vuhanu u centralnoj Kini, ali je potom zahvatila i ceo svet. U takvim kriznim situacijama mediji imaju veoma veliku ulogu u društvu, a lokalni mediji su značajni da bi građane svakodnevno informisali o događajima iz neposrednog okruženja. U radu se istražuje da li građani koji žive na jugu Srbije smatraju da je lokalno novinarstvo potrebno kao i da li su zainteresovani za lokalne vesti, posebno za lokalne vesti u vezi sa pandemijom izazvanom koronavirusom. U istraživanju smo pokušali da utvrdimo kako građani juga Srbije ocenjuju izveštavanje lokalnih medija kada je reč o pandemiji virusa korona, smatraju li to izveštavanje objektivnim i profesionalnim, kao i da li uočavaju propuste u oblasti kršenja prava na privatnost u novinarskom pisanju o pandemiji. Rezultati pokazuju da su građani juga Srbije zainteresovani za lokalne vesti, kao i da su posebno bili zainteresovani za vesti u vezi sa pandemijom koju je izazvao virus korona. Takođe, rezultati pokazuju da se građani juga Srbije informišu putem lokalnih medija o lokalnim važnim temama, a posebno o činjenicama i događajima u vezi sa pandemijom koju je izazvao virus korona. Na osnovu dobijenih rezultata utvrdili smo da građani juga Srbije ocenjuju izveštavanje lokalnih medija o pandemiji izazvanoj koronavirusom kao i o drugim važnim događajima kao objektivno i profesionalno. Rezultati pokazuju i da građani juga Srbije ne uočavaju propuste u novinarskom pisanju o pandemiji koja je izazvana koronavirusom u oblasti ugrožavanja prava na privatnost kao što su: senzacionalizam, oslanjanje na neproverene izvore, korišćenje fotografija bez dozvole i slična neetička praksa.*

Ključne reči: *lokalni mediji, pandemija, novinarstvo, uloga medija, jug Srbije, publika*

⁴ Ovaj rad deo je master rada "Lokalno novinarstvo i publika u Republici Srbiji u vreme pandemije izazvane koronavirusom" odbranjenog na Filozofskom fakultetu u Nišu (25.5.2021).