

Special monitoring of six national TV and radio broadcasters during the first month of the COVID-19 emergency in Bulgaria, 13 March — 12 April 2020. Summary of findings

During the first month of the state of emergency in Bulgaria (13 March — 12 April 2020), the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) conducted a special monitoring exercise focussed on the content of the news emissions and of the topical public-affairs rubrics/talk shows of Bulgarian National Television Channel 1 (BNT1), bTV, Nova TV, Bulgaria On Air, Horizont Radio (Bulgarian National Radio) and Darik Radio Bulgaria. The monitored content of these broadcasters included the following emissions/rubrics: BNT1 — Sutreshen blok [the Morning Show], Denyat zapochva s Georgi Lyubenov [The Day starts with Georgi Lyubenov], Po sveta i u nas [Around the World and at Home] (8:00 pm); bTV — Tazi sutrin [This Morning]; Tazi sabota i nedelya [This Saturday and Sunday] and bTV Novinite [News] (7:00 pm); NOVA TV — Zdravei, Bulgaria! [Hello, Bulgaria!]; 'Sabudi se!' ['Wake Up!'] and Novinite na NOVA [News] (7:00 pm); BULGARIA ON AIR — Bulgaria sutrin [Bulgaria In The Morning], Novinite On AIR [News On Air] (6:30 pm); HORIZONT Radio — Predi vsichki [Ahead of Everyone], Sabota 150 [Saturday 150], Nedelya 150 [Sunday 150] and Centralen bulletin [the Central Bulletin] at 7:00 pm; Darik Radio Bulgaria — Darik Café, Sedmitsata [The Week] and Novinite [The News] at 6:00 pm.

On 13 March 2020 the Government of Bulgaria announced its intent to submit to the National Assembly (the Bulgarian Parliament) a proposal for declaring a national state of emergency in order to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. The announcement was made two days after the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared a global COVID-19 pandemic (11 March 2020). From that point on, mass media mobilised their human and technical resources to both address the challenge and ensure that they uphold the highest standards of journalism in their work. The media services providers (MSPs) included in the monitoring scope adapted immediately their programme schemes by including live broadcasts, videoconferences and special news emissions. From the very first day of the state of emergency, the Government and the Covid Task Force provided sign language interpreting (SLI) at their briefings in order to help the TV broadcasters which had not yet established this practice. In the first days of the monitoring period BNT had SLI-supported content only for its live coverage of the official briefings and for the news emissions at 4 pm. After 20 March BNT1 provided SLI for the central news emission Po sveta i u nas [Around the World and at Home] at 8:00 pm, Referendum and for the documentaries dedicated to coronavirus which were aired after the news at 8:00 pm. bTV News at 7:00 pm were for the first time accompanied with SLI on 13 March 2020. On 19 March 2020 NOVA TV provided its first SLI coverage of the central news at 7:00 pm. The extraordinary programmes of bTV and NOVA TV on the Covid topic are also accompanied with SLI. The MSPs use crawlers to alert their viewers of forthcoming special live events or Covid Task Force briefings. Crawlers also provide information about the situation in Bulgaria and the total number of persons infected during news emissions and special commentaries. Since 15 March BULGARIA ON AIR has been running crawlers showing headline news of the day during the central news emissions (as well as during the brief news emissions in the morning block).

Coronavirus also became a central topic of the public-affairs rubrics/talk shows of the monitored MSPs. It is self-explanatory why COVID-19 and the related topics took the centre stage in news emissions and dominated the commentaries at public-affairs rubrics during the state of emergency. Similar are the good practices of all leading media across the world. The evolution of and dealing with any public crisis hinges on the level of targeted efficiency and on the operability of anti-crisis management. That said, the role of traditional media as mediators of crisis policies becomes crucial. In catastrophic situations, trust or distrust in mass media is vulnerable to change and has an impact on the management of the consequences of the disastrous occurrences.

The pandemic was an overwhelming theme across all MSPs monitored during the period 13 March — 12 April 2020. Saying that it was the top-line, centre-stage and headline theme in all news emissions and public-affairs rubrics would be an understatement. Covid was perhaps the only topic. Nevertheless, mass media maintained balance and calmness in explaining and reporting the information which was changing by the hour. On 14 March 2020 all media monitored by the CEM stood in support for the measures taken by the Covid Task Force and by the Government and called on their viewers and listeners to stay home.

On 12 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) published *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*. The Considerations are in the form of messages addressed to various groups and aimed to support their mental and psychosocial well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following advice was given to the general public: *'Minimize watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 that causes you to feel anxious or distressed; seek information only from trusted sources and mainly so that you can take practical steps to prepare your plans and protect yourself and loved ones. Seek information updates at specific times during the day, once or twice. The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried. Get the facts; not rumours and misinformation.'* The WHO Considerations are addressed to the users of information rather than to mass media, and this is for a reason. In a crisis situation, mass media have a duty to provide verified, official information throughout their programmes so as to satisfy the interest of the public. What and how much of the information should be used, and how children should be protected from distress, is responsibility of the information users.

In the programmes of BNT1, bTV, NOVA TV, Bulgaria On Air, Horizont Radio and Darik Radio Bulgaria, the CEM monitoring identified a large number of extraordinary live broadcasts of Parliament sessions, Government meetings, statements of the President of Bulgaria and of cabinet ministers, briefings at which the Covid Task Force provided updates about the number of Covid patients or anti-Covid measures, etc. In the monitoring period the CEM registered direct broadcasts of 34 scheduled briefings of the Covid Task Force at 8 am and 5 pm as part of morning blocks or as standalone special news emissions. In this one month, there were 28 extraordinary live broadcasts from the premises of the Government, of the Parliament and of the Presidency. Some extraordinary press conferences of the Prime Minister and of other cabinet ministers were also joined by members of the Covid Task Force. The average duration of the extraordinary live broadcasts was around 60 minutes, although the individual broadcasts varied from 15 to 180 minutes. /Link to the Government briefings: <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/briefings?p=1>

The first extraordinary briefings made sense as the country had come to a state of emergency and the public's sensitivity and demand for information were running high. After the first week of the monitoring period, the extraordinary briefings from the Government premises essentially did not contain information of extraordinary importance which deserved direct and full coverage in the airtime of national radio and TV channels. All the six media covered by the CEM monitoring aired these events directly and from end to end (one exception is Darik Radio as they ended their live coverage shortly after the official statements of the institutions present at the event).

Furthermore, two midnight briefings were held and aired live during the monitoring period. At the first of these briefings, which took place after a late-night Government meeting, the announcement was made that a proposal for declaring a state of emergency will be brought to Parliament. The briefing took place in the midnight hours between 12 and 13 March 2020. At the second extraordinary late-night briefing (11 pm of 1 April), the Speaker of

Parliament Mrs Tsveta Karayancheva announced that MP Hasan Ademov had tested positive for COVID-19. From the perspective of protecting the public's interest and sound mind, extraordinary late-night briefings are justified if the information provided is essential for the life of citizens. The monitored MSPs provided live coverage of all events organised by the institutions, meaning that often times they had to interrupt their current programmes. In the first instance, this puts the audience in suspense which later morphs into frustration and criticism at MSPs for spelling anxiety among the population.

The official briefings aired in the first part of the monitoring period provided to listeners and viewers information about the processes which were rolling out (baseline data and daily updates, state of emergency/draft law on the state of emergency in Bulgaria, escalation of the situation throughout the world). Especially impactful was the 'first-hand' information given in detailed interviews with Professor Mutaftchiyski (Head of Covid Task Force) and with cabinet ministers. In a polemic tone, but without breaching the ethical rules of appropriate conduct, journalists did not spare policy-makers from uneasy questions which the audience is concerned about. Light on the evolving coronavirus situation was shed from multiple perspectives by a variety of experts (medical professionals, a financier, lawyers, representatives of associations of the tourist industry and of the international transport sector), staff members of ministries, MPs, one MEP, local mayors. Given its impact across the board, the theme was discussed in its health, social, educational, economic, cultural and international aspects.

During the state of emergency, each of the monitored programs performed a range of public functions: provide to the public timely and reliable information about the situation in Bulgaria and around the world; enable citizens understand the official positions and steps of government institutions in combating the outbreak; provide venue for representatives of various political, social, professional and other groups to voice their positions on the topic of COVID-19; broadcast a variety of advice and clips dedicated to personal hygiene and behaviour, offset the deficit of cultural events by broadcasting a range of documentary and feature films, musical performances and shows; contribute to maintaining public awareness in the conditions of the emergency; integrate people with communication deficits by providing more content accompanied with sign language interpreting or running captions (subtitles) as well as provide indirect psychological support to citizens, in particular to lonesome and isolated people, by being present in their daily life.

All the information after 13 March 2020 was dedicated to the pandemic of the new coronavirus. Topics 'unrelated' to COVID-19 appeared only sporadically in the emissions. In their news emissions and topical public-affairs rubrics/talk shows, the monitored MSPs kept the public informed of the emergency and of the measures undertaken by the State, including by providing various perspectives (political, social, professional) to the topic of combating coronavirus in our country. The official institutional sources of information became crucially important during the state of emergency in Bulgaria. In the first 10 days of the period, these were exactly the sources of information used almost exclusively by the four nationwide TV channels and by the two nationwide radio programmes. Mass media have endeavoured to provide as many perspectives as possible in order to respond to the information requirements of the widest possible range of viewer/listeners. The MSPs worked to provide useful and reliable information in the form of instructions, opinions, advice and measures recommended by experts and professionals in the various aspects of the problem. Noteworthy is the moderate and balanced tone of hosts/anchor as they were seeking and presenting information from their interlocutors in a calm manner and without imparting fear or panic. The introduced state of emergency and the spread of the outbreak on a national and international level meant that coronavirus became the dominant editorial content in the monitored news emissions and public-affairs rubrics.

In the monitoring period the MSPs programmes unfolded a consistent information and awareness campaign. In a balanced manner, without panic or anxiety, they kept informing the public about the situation in Bulgaria and beyond. The large number of reportages, live broadcasts and videoconferences made the mass media viewers witnesses of all measures which the State institutions (Government, Parliament, President, Task Force) took at any moment of time to address the new situation. The programmes of the mass media observed were focussed on announcing the safety measures and on providing citizens with timely information about the situation in Bulgaria and in the world. All briefings of the competent institutions regarding the multiple changes which are under way in Bulgaria at present were pre-announced and then broadcast live. Both the hosts/anchors and their interlocutors (mainly experts and health professionals) kept calling on citizens to remain calm, refrain from stockpiling food and medicines, be self-disciplined and avoid leaving their homes without a pressing reason. The main objective was to calm down the broad public.

The focussed monitoring exercise did not identify breaches of the Radio and TV Act (RTVA) or of the ethical journalism standards in the programmes of the MSPs observed. Neither did the monitoring exercise identify hate speech in materials reflecting life in Roma communities or during appearances of members of the Chinese community in Bulgaria or of Bulgarians living abroad. 'Sensitive topics' such as compliance with quarantine measures in ghettos, freedom of expression, use of the armed forces to combat coronavirus or wage levels in the various sectors were addressed in a cautious and measured manner, without stoking hate among various population groups, avoiding any racism or discrimination, without instilling panic and without unnecessary spectacularity.

The observation of the editorial policy trends in the past month revealed that the public MSPs BNR (Bulgarian National Radio) and BNT (Bulgarian National Television) endeavour to inform the public of the events occurring during the coronavirus pandemic in a detailed, concrete, socially responsible and objective manner. Public media respond to the demand for socially relevant information at times of disaster and isolation, when timely information can be life-saving; they avoid the traps of sensations and small talk, forestall panic by wisely selected news and rationally justified conclusions which not only prevent the systems at risk from trespassing the threshold of 'constructive paranoia', but, conversely, help them maintain their viability for a healthy recovery from dismal situations. Despite the increasing raft of critical opinions and alternative perspectives during the evolution of the crisis, the problematic content has been insignificant. The mass media were keen to air positive news as well, keep a moderate tone, avoid spelling unnecessary anxiety, forbid statements which feature hate speech, racism and/or discrimination, and embargo any content which may be harmful to the mental health of children in the meaning of Article 17 RTVA and of the Criteria.

As a public media services provider, from 17 March 2020 the BNT has been broadcasting educational content for schoolchildren together with the Ministry of Education and Science through the initiative 'S BNT na uchilishte' ['AT SCHOOL WITH BNT'] (in the programmes of BNT2 and BNT4). The BNT kept broadcasting televised lessons in various subjects from the curricula of schoolchildren which had switched to remote learning during the national state of emergency. Although that was the first experience of the public TV broadcaster with remote teaching and learning, the initiative demonstrated, at a time of crisis, BNT's organisational capacity to mobilise resources and support families and schools with the education of their children. BNT made use of advanced information technologies and created a free mobile application for news streams and a special COVID-19 section in its website. A Viber group was also created for the schoolchildren who followed the educational programmes of

BNT2 and BNT4.

The monitoring exercise established that the information policy of the public MSPs BNR and BNT is compliant with the requirements for pluralism of opinions (Article 6(3)(6) of the RTVA) as each news emission or topical public-affairs rubric reflected the diversity of ideas and beliefs in society by ensuring a pluralistic presentation of the various perspectives. BNR and BNT have also been compliant with Article 6(3)(8) of the RTVA which requires them to enable citizens be informed of the official position of the State on issues that are highly important for society.

While in crisis situations mass media tend to overexpose negative news, especially in their public-affairs rubrics and news emissions, the monitoring exercise found that the MSPs maintained professional standards and a balanced approach in their coverage of the emergency situation in Bulgaria. As mentioned above, in its mental health recommendations the WHO encouraged people to minimise the use of media information and to seek only information from trusted sources. However, mass media are not encouraged to minimise the amount of verified 'crisis-related news' (even though the news is inevitably disconcerting in the existing situation). Minimising the news streams would be both prejudicial to the independence of editorial policy and deprive the public in general (and certain remote or specific communities in particular) from the fundamental right of human beings to receive credible and up-to-date information of the developments as well as instructions for survival in crisis and isolation.

The monitoring exercise established that the MSPs which create the channels BNT1, bTV, Nova TV, Bulgaria On Air, Horizont Radio and Darik Radio Bulgaria operate in accordance with the principles laid down in Article 10 of the RTVA: uphold the freedom of expression, guarantee the right to be informed; protect the confidentiality of information sources; safeguard the privacy of citizens; and avoid programmes which instil intolerance among citizens or undermine the good morals, especially if they stoke animosity on the basis of race, gender, religion or nationality.