Bosch **Alumni**
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PROMOTING QUALITY JOURNALISM:

"Getting Quality Journalism Closer to Audiences on Social Networks: Journalists as Social Media Influencers"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Getting Quality Journalism Closer to Audiences on Social Networks: Journalists as Social Media Influencers" is the first research work into the habits of journalists in using social networks for the promotion of their work in the Balkans. Two researchers from Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, members of the Bosch Alumni Network, argue that journalists should be more personally active in promoting their work on social media. They conducted research involving more than 120 journalists and editors and started a discussion about a topic that seems to be still fairly new in practice in four of the countries of the Western Balkans.

How to use social media in everyday journalism is already old news in some regions. A lack of media freedom in the Balkan countries, the spread of 'fake news' through social networks due to the absence of quality content and the need to rethink journalists' influence within communities, have led us to the question of whether journalists are using social networks to promote quality journalism. Despite some efforts that media outlets are taking and new approaches they are testing, we conclude that the answer is **no**.

1. INTRODUCTION

The worldwide media is facing numerous challenges in the era of social networks, and the Balkan media is no exception to this. These challenges are becoming more complicated to overcome bearing in mind: (1) the unstable political circumstances of transitional democracies (including a lack of media freedom); (2) the influence of competing interests of global political players in the region; and (3) a lack of media literacy both among journalists and the public at large[1].

As audiences are constantly moving from one network to another, while admitting to a significant extent that they are looking for news content through social media channels, the media and journalists in the Western Balkan have never discussed the issue of (re)gaining their interest and trust. Consequently, it is not only the business models of media outlets that are suffering, but in political circumstances where, on one side, civic values and rights have still to be learned and on the other, the accountability of public figures is still lacking, factual reporting is endangered.

The aim of this research is to learn more about the use of social media by journalists in the Balkans in order to initiate an educated discussion about the necessity of being present on social networks for journalistic purposes. As social networks sites primarily focus on personalities and individuals – people-to-people networks[2] – we have chosen to focus on journalists as media

practitioners, rather than on media outlets and their policies. We searched in order to answer the questions of how much journalists are using social media to report to their audiences, and whether they are knowledgeable about bursting or creating information bubbles through engagement and growing their own digital identities. We tried to answer to what extent, if any, journalists are aware of the importance and power of social media, how many are using them for two-way communication and, most importantly, how many are engaging the public in political and other socially responsible debates. And finally: how many of them are social media influencers?

The research stems from a body of recent literature on a "deficit model" approach, meaning that we will build on an argument which implies that misinformation thrives due to a deficit of factual information. Being aware of the limits of this approach, we want to initiate a conversation about one of the possible ways of influencing "manufactured landscapes where social and cultural life unfolds in tandem with specific technological devices and algorithms"[3].

The text before you will assume that journalists should be more present in social media networks and share factual reports in their personal capacity, and will try to answer the question of why this is currently not the case in these four Western Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. With the aim of clearly setting up a framework for the discussion, we will deliberate media literacy theories, concepts of networked journalism and the recent body of research into news consumption. The study will reflect on the findings of a survey, focus groups and in-depth elite interviews with journalists mostly from these four countries. In an attempt to offer recommendations, we will also open up another set of questions and challenges that emerge from the study.

2. THEORETICAL CHAPTER

2.1. Yet another literacy

> 'Media', 'digital' or 'cyber' literacy assumes knowledge of who makes the news, how it is selected, how it is financed, but also a set of skills to produce media content, and understanding the goals of simple transmission of a person's messages, self-expression or influencing and interacting with others. Decisions on how to apply knowledge, skills and understanding are constructed through culture. Highly media-literate journalists understand that readers are not just spectators, but also contributors, and thus they build communities.

Before the era of internet affordability, it might seem simple to define media literacy as "knowledge about how the news is made: who makes it, how it is selected and how it is financed"[4]. Now it requires further inclusion of critical engagement[5].

1   Balkan Countries Most Vulnerable to 'Fake' News, Report, Martin Dimitrov, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, March 30 2018, available at:
http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/report-balkan-countries-most-vulnerable-to-adverse-effects-of-fake-news-03-29-2018, (accessed December 1, 2018]
2   Despite some of the biggest media outlets in Latin America threatening to pull content from Facebook due to the company's unfair treatment of media content and an overall decline in the reach of Facebook business pages, and regardless of pleas from Balkan media outlets not to play with the public's right to information, Facebook introduced altered algorithms and told publishers to try to find their own way to remain in users' news feeds and in people's domain of interest, as the company seeks to improve users' experience by enhancing people-to-people relations. Sources: Brazil's biggest newspaper pulls content from Facebook after algorithm change, The Guardian, 8 February 2018, [accessed 1 December 2018]; Hey, Mark Zucker-

berg: My Democracy Isn't Your Laboratory, The New York Times, 15 November 2017, [accessed 1 December 2018]; Facebook tells publishers to take it or leave it, The Verge, 13 February 2018, [accessed 1 December 2018).
3   A Field Guide to "Fake News" and Other Information Disorders, Liliana Bounegru, Jonathan Gray, Tommaso Venturini and Michele Mauri, Public Data Lab, Amsterdam, 2017, p. 8.
4   Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, [accessed 24 November 2018).
5   Children's use of the internet: reflections on the emerging research agenda, Sonia Livingstone, New Media & Society, 2003.

The United Kingdom's top media regulatory authority, Ofcom, builds on this requirement and sees a necessity of fulfilling a number of preconditions (skills, understanding and knowledge) so that people can make full use of the opportunities presented by old and new communications services[6]. Hereby, Ofcom understands 'skills' as a set of technological competences to locate media content, while being aware of the potential risks and possibilities of (self-)regulating this action. The segment of 'understanding' within Ofcom's definition refers to a person's capability to interpret media, while being aware of the general context, design and rhetorical features, as well as of production processes and institutional and ownership control. 'Understanding' the media also refers to a person's ability of critical reception of media content in terms of accuracy and reliability. And the last segment in defining media literacy refers to a person's ability to produce media content regardless of whether the goal is the simple transmission of a person's messages, self-expression or "in order to influence or interact with others"[7]. This study is particularly interested in the last segment of the definition – referring to influencing and interaction with others.

Thus, when David Buckingham in 2007 asked "do we really need yet another literacy?"[8] or just a simple set of skills for using digital technologies, bearing in mind the ubiquitous presence of digital media and digital news consumption[9,10] and the outcomes of earlier mentioned political processes, contemporary academia answered a rather straightforward 'yes'.

We opt to use the terms 'contemporary media literacy', 'digital media literacy' and 'cyber literacy' interchangeably. In line with the definition mentioned before, the concept of media literacy first and foremost underlines access to information, and the efficient search for it, comparison of the resources and understanding of the economic and political forces that are shaping information. It is also understanding the representational and not only the reflective role of the media, achieved through the use of specific language and coding mechanisms.

Bearing in mind the economic and political aspects of media control in addition to the persuasive and emotional dimensions of our interpretations of digital media, we think that Buckingham[11] correctly recognises that defining media literacy has to be rooted in ideology, thus involving social norms, as well as relationships of power.

We acknowledge that Mejias'[12] analysis of social media and the argument that technological development leaves people more submissive to the economy, control and influence, offered a more accurate picture and corrected many of the flaws of the optimistic understanding of digital social networks[13]. However, we find Jenkins' contribution to defining media literacy useful,

especially the assumption that people can assume a bigger role than audiences and voters have and can use social media to become actors contributing to media systems. In addition to basic textual literacy, Jenkins adds the importance of understanding media as a social skill.[14]. He argues that, as a consequence of the relationship-building affordance of social networks, a participatory culture will emerge as a response to the explosion of the new (social media) availability and suggests fostering the skills and cultures for using digital media and social networking tools. His optimistic notion of users, appropriating and recirculating media content seems to ignore the paradoxical fact that, even though social media platforms require little functional literacy, they can potentially cause users to become disenfranchised[15].

For the purposes of this study we will also employ another argument of Jenkins': the media operates in certain cultural and institutional contexts which determine the goals of its usage and the ways it is used. Although this study will look at social networks which are online social media with a global spread, we will deal with Jenkins' suggestion of taking an 'ecological approach'[16], where the focus is on the fact that media systems consist not only of communication technologies, but also of cultural communities and activities in accordance with social, legal, political, economic institutions and practices[17]. "The choices that we make in deciding how to use knowledge and tools are constructed through culture and that is the most important thing."[18]

We will focus only on the decisions and level of knowledge within the culture of journalists. Applying the aforementioned definition of media literacy within this culture leads us to another useful concept – networked journalism, which assumes "the collaborative nature of journalism: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story".[19] This concept suggests that readers are not just spectators, but also contributors. A highly media-literate journalist would understand that "what comes 'after' the story (is published) is nearly as important as its sourcing and production"[20]. Ultimately, this understanding would not only affect the very essence of news production, but would lead to a change in the reader–journalist relationship, where journalists would take on a new role leading to the creation of communities and a possible change in the media's business model. Ten years ago, Mansell and Beckett[21] acknowledged that networked journalism is not "a fully open space for dialogue", noticed that journalists are taking on new roles and insisted on the growing need to understand the crossing of this boundary. While understanding and discussion on the topic is still lacking, new roles of communicators in the digital sphere have emerged – those of social media influencers/opinion leaders.

6   About Media Literacy, Ofcom, (accessed 1 December 2018).
7   Digital media literacies: Rethinking media education in the age of the Internet, Research in Comparative and International Education, David Buckingham, 2007.
8   Ibid.
9   "In the U.S., roughly nine-in-ten adults (93%) get at least some news online (either via mobile or desktop), and the online space has become a host for the digital homes of both legacy news outlets and new, "born on the web" news outlets." – Digital News Fact Sheet, Pew Research Center, 6 June 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
10   "Digital outlets serve as the main source of news for the majority of those under 35, including 64% of those between the ages of 18 and 24. Meanwhile, TV still reigns supreme for 51% of those over 55." – Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, (accessed 1 December 2018).
11   Beyond Technology: Children's Learning in the Age of Digital Culture, David Buckingham, Polity, 2007.
12   Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World, Ulises Ali Mejias, Minnesota University Press, 2013.
13   Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century, Henry Jenkins, The John D. and Catherine T. Macarthur Foundation, Chicago, 2006.

14   The role of Facebook users' self-systems in generating social relationships and social capital effects, Chang-Hyun Jin, New Media & Society, 2015.
15   It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens, Danah Boyd, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.
16   Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century, Henry Jenkins, The John D. and Catherine T. Macarthur Foundation, Chicago, 2006.
17   Ibid.
18   Ibid.
19   Is It a Bird? Is It a Plane? No! It's SuperMedia!: Networked Journalism in Supermedia, Charlie Beckett, Blackwell, London, 2008.
20   Ibid.
21   Crossing Boundaries: New Media and Networked Journalism, Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell, 2008, (accessed 1 December 2018).

2.2. New gatekeepers

Distribution of traditional media outlets' news products is mostly in the hands of ordinary people, i.e. it depends of people's social network friends' decision to share it. Social media influencers (opinion leaders, micro-celebrities, self-brands), i.e. those who use their personal image to attract attention and a large number of followers and are those who share information with people who are not frequent media consumers, are essential in the news-gathering process.

To answer the question of why we are focusing on the concept 'social media influencers', we will employ the conclusions of Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage that "opinion leaders are perceived as central or even crucial to the news-gathering process"[22]. Taking a further step away from the general conclusion that social networks are one of the key ways that people experience news, they engaged with the theories of opinion leaders and of the concept of incidental news consumption, employing quantitative and qualitative methods to find out that Swedish young people aged 16–19 expect to be informed on social networks, in a mixture of private and public postings, but mostly rely on opinion leaders. Concluding that the distribution of traditional media outlets' news products is mostly in hands of ordinary people, i.e. it depends on people's social network friends' decision to share it, the authors claim that opinion leaders are essential in the news-gathering process for young people. "They express a positive attitude towards these people and even see them as a prerequisite for their keeping up on the news."[23]

We think that there is strong evidence of differences in the predictors of trust in media, showing the important role of different national contexts, "illustrating the varying pathways development of media trust follows in these varied contexts along socioeconomic and cultural lines"[24]. Consequently, we understand that there are or may be differences in news consumption between Sweden and the Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, the importance of opinion leaders/influencers may vary in different contexts. However, we anecdotally find them regionally important, especially in political communication, which follows the findings of similar features in significantly different political environments[25].

Since social networks remain essential for news consumption, even in our region of interest[26], we consider social media influencers crucial for news distribution also in the Western Balkans, following the argument that "(o)pinion leaders are essential for the flow of communication in networks and consequently should be crucial for the flow of communication on social networking sites."[27]

To support this argument, we will employ Katz and Lazarsfeld's definition of opinion leaders

as those who share information with people who are not frequent media consumers[28]. For the purposes of this study we will use the terms 'opinion leaders' and 'social media (digital/micro-brand) influencers' interchangeably, as both in fact exert an influence in their personal capacity over their followers and the way they consume and process information.

To define in further detail the concept of our study, we offer a short background of the phenomenon. This is dominantly discussed in academic work related to marketing[29]. In the area of advertising, influencers have grown significantly following a surge in the number of users especially on YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. Also known as micro-celebrities, the concept of 'influencers' entails the development of a personal social media presence by creating one's own self-brand or image "and the use of that image to attract attention and a large number of followers"[30]. This influence and the overall activities of influencers in the field of marketing have already been recognised and regulated in the United States, for "promoting or endorsing products through social media"[31], as well as in the United Kingdom[32], for transparently disclosing that certain suggestions, recommendations and opinions were paid for as an advertisement or sponsored content.

"Initiated as a self-branding, the reason for the growth of social media influencers is threefold:
(1) Social media tacitly promises fame (and subsequent wealth) to 'ordinary' users and thus encourages practices of micro-celebrity.
(2) Within a political culture of neoliberal individualism, self-branding is encouraged with the promise of reward.
(3) The commercial viability of some Social Media Influencers [...], whose success depends on self-branding and practices of micro-celebrity, has proven to be both inspirational and seemingly replicable."[33]

Merely by sharing information, influencers can and do influence (news) consumption, initiate discussion, provide expertise, interpretation and the context of the news, and thus are perceived as trustworthy and experts.[34] However, the extent of their influence depends on: (1) the number of people they have in their network, the number of their posts and likes; and/or (2) the type of engagements and emotional connection with the audience[35]. The latter is referred to as 'social media capital', entailing the expert power, reward power and authority power[36] of influencers to set trends and lead to a change in impressions and in behaviour.

Criticism of the phenomenon, again, comes from the field of marketing. Mark Ritson argues that the actual level of influence of digital media influencers is low or non-existent, and he outlines three reasons for this: (a) the number of fake followers; (b) a lack of trust due to the lack of authenticity of the message; (3) and a lack of actual understanding of how and whether trust

22   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
23   Ibid.
24   Trust in alternative and professional media: The case of the youth news audiences in three European countries, Jakub Macek, Alena Macková, Vassilis Pavlopoulos, Veronika Kalmus, C. Michael Elavsky & Šerek Jan, Published online, 2017, (accessed 1 December 2018).
25   Followers Are Opinion Leaders: The Role of People in the Flow of Political Communication on and beyond Social Networking Sites, Rune Karlsen, European Journal of Communication, 2015, (accessed 1 December 2018).
26   Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, (accessed 1 December 2018).
27   Followers Are Opinion Leaders: The Role of People in the Flow of Political Communication on and beyond Social Networking Sites, Rune Karlsen, European Journal of Communication, 2015, (accessed 1 December 2018).

28   Personal Inflauence, the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications, Elihu Katz and Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 1955.
29   Film Critics: Influencers or Predictors?, Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M Shugan, Journal of Marketing, 1997; Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers, Susie Khamis and Lawrence Ang & Raymond Welling, Celebrity Studies, 2016, (accessed 1 December 2018).
30   Ibid.
31   FTC Staff Reminds Influencers and Brands to Clearly Disclose Relationship, Federal Trade Commission, 2017, (accessed 1 December 2018).
32   Online Affiliate Marketing, Committees of Advertising, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
33   Ibid.
34   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
35   Social Media Marketing. Theories and Applications, Stephan Dahl, SAGE, 2014.
36   Social Media Marketing, Third Edition, Tracy L. Tuten and Michael R. Solomon, SAGE, 2017.

transforms into influence through behavioural change[37]. However, as the author recognises, despite all the outlined issues, the level of investment in influencer marketing is still only growing. While acknowledging the downsides that may apply both to the field of marketing and the field of political communication, we have decided to focus on the opportunities offered through the definition of this very concept and the contemporary trends in the sphere of social networks.

These opportunities will be furthermore contested by the context of the geographical region we have chosen to focus on, both in terms of the political and economic structure, and in terms of media freedom.

2.3. State of the media

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia are all marked as being partly free countries by the Freedom of the Press report describing media independence around the world[1]. South-East European civil society organisations report negative indexes on clientelism in the media, i.e. high political influence on the media and journalists. Non-transparent financing and ownership are fuelling political and economic pressures.

2.3.1. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political pressure on and intimidation of journalists, including physical and verbal attacks, hacking of websites and political, institutional and economic pressure and defamation have continued in the country. The European Commission Country Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina suggested adding that one of the burning issues in the media in this country is the need for reform of the public broadcasting system. The authorities do not collect data on threats and attacks against journalists and media workers, and swift investigations and prosecution of the perpetrators is not always ensured[38]. "Journalists are attacked for their ethnic origins, as well as for what they write. Defamation suits by politicians often serve to intimidate journalists and deter them from pursuing their work… Employment conditions for journalists are precarious: they are hired on short contracts and are paid little." [39] Media companies with different owners and different political affiliations, as well as media from different parts of the country seem to be divided along ethnic and political lines. Worrying cases of self-censorship have been reported, said the EU Country Report.

2.3.2. Croatia
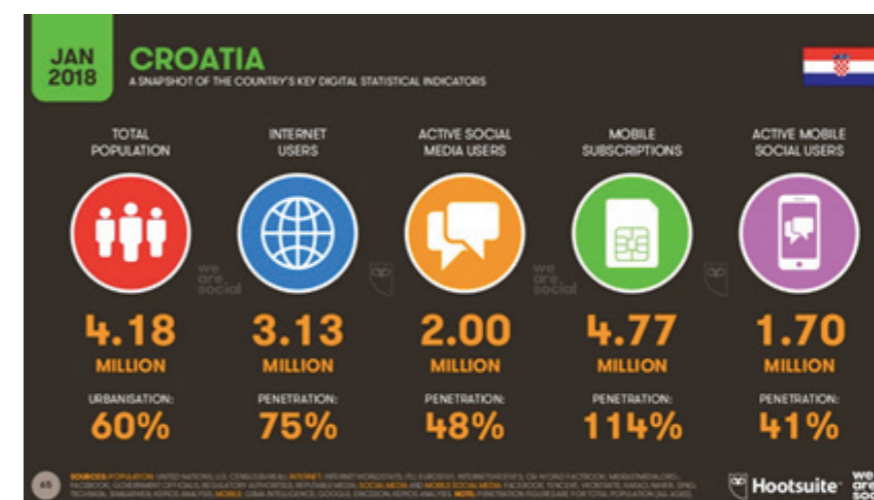
The Croatian media market is characterised by strong commercial television providers, a declining print sector and a vibrant mix of traditional and alternative online websites, stated the 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Report[40]. A general overview of the Croatian media landscape shows the rise of rightwing and politically conservative voices. The public broadcaster in Croatia, HRT, in the past few years has undergone attacks on its editorial independence by the ruling party. "A small group of independent journalists remain in the public broadcaster HRT, but often find themselves struggling to maintain professional standards in the light of an increasingly conservative editorial policy." [41] IREX's Media Sustainability Index described the state of journalism in Croatia saying that there were only islands of good journalism surrounded by an ocean of trivial, editorially controlled content[42]. The non-profit media, independent of political influence, often struggles to survive on a day-to-day basis. However, a number of successful campaigns crowdfunded by citizens[43], have supported the media. Non-transparent media ownership also remains a concerning issue[44]. The media and journalists themselves, depending on their political affiliation, are stand opposed to each other, with many insults and attacks reported, and mostly liberal journalists are called out as being "traitors" and "anti-Croats"[45].

2.3.3. Montenegro

European institutions have stated their concern[46] at the media situation in Montenegro, as well as at the state of freedom of expression. The country stands in 108th place out of the 180 countries measured by the Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index[47], noting that journalists are harassed and threatened by the country's rulers. "Self-censorship and safety continue to be major challenges. Defamation has been decriminalised since 2011, but lawsuits against independent journalists and media are common." There has been little if any progress against independent journalists and media.

37   How 'influencers' made my arse a work of art, Mark Ritson, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
38   EC Staff Working Document, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018 Report (accessed 1 December 2018).
39   Return to the Past Rhetoric, B&H, Reporters Without Borders, 2018 (accessed 1 December 2018).

40   Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford (accessed 1 December 2018).
41   Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford (accessed 1 December 2018).
42   IREX, Media Sustainability Index, Croatia, 2017 (accessed 1 December 2018).
43   "Ima nas" crowdfunding campaign by Lupiga online magazine, provided citizens to financially support the media outlet, which is critical towards the government while they were facing hard financial situation.
44   International media freedom delegation in Croatia: some improvements, old and new issues, Reporters Without Borders, 2018 (accessed 1 December 2018).
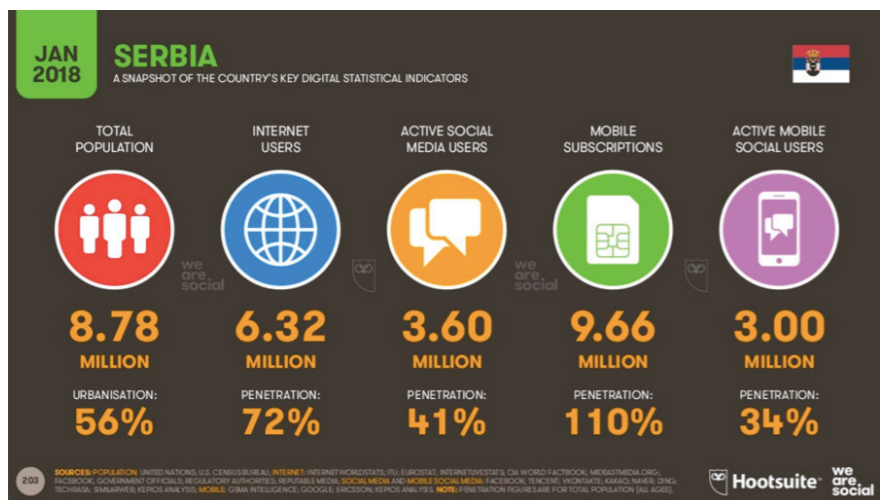45   Press Freedom in Croatia, Hate Speech and Hope for Change, SEEMO, 2018 (accessed 1 December 2018).
46   Brussels is seriously concerned with the state of media freedom in Montenegro: No progress, SEENPM, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
47   Public Media Under Pressure, Reporters Without Borders, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).

regarding solving cases of violence against media actors[48]. The media scene is divided, with the public media widely supporting the ruling party and some private and non-profit media standing in opposition. It is hard for private media companies to survive, having in mind the insufficient and politically instrumentalised adver-

tising market in the country. "Few of Montenegro's 73 media outlets are distancing themselves from political polarisation. It is reflected in a lack of professionalism, unacceptable political pressures, and a discrepancy between the expectations of citizens and information provided them by the media"[49].

2.3.4. Serbia

Under President Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia has become a country where it is unsafe to be a journalist, Reporters Without Borders warns in its first sentence describing the country[50]. In their special report on Serbia, Reporters Without Borders said that a concerning issue in the country is media ownership and media pluralism, as well as

the fact that an alarming number of attacks on journalists have not been investigated, solved or punished, nor the aggressive smear campaigns[51] that the pro-government media has been orchestrating against investigative reporters. "The Serbian media market is small and oversaturated with media working under extremely harsh economic pressure. There are more than 1,600 media outlets registered in the Serbian Business Registers Agency (SBRA), although due to a poorly regulated media system, the exact number of registered active media outlets remains unknown."[52] The latest European Commission Country Report stated that Serbia[53] is moderately prepared in the field of the information society and the media, while IREX marked Serbia as a

country which has adopted EU laws but does not have any results from them[54]. "Journalists are paid inadequately in most media jobs. Generally, because journalists fear losing their jobs, they agree to abandon their professional values. They engage in self-censorship and know which topics to cover in order to avoid conflict with the authorities or with editorial policies. A number of important topics are never on the agenda," said IREX's Media Sustainability Index for Serbia.

The issue of ownership is especially dangerous for all four countries of the region since murky deals and political influence through the owners affect the financing and thus the editorial policies of media, which remain open to the control of governments. State institutions in Serbia, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, remain among the largest advertisers in the media which, combined with lack of general transparency, adds up to the chains many media companies are captured in.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Research question: To what extent, if any, do journalists in their personal capacity engage with social networks as media platforms to disseminate and deliberate information?
Sub-questions:
1. What is Western Balkan journalists' level of digital competence and how does it influence their social media usage?
2. How do they perceive the publishing potential of social networks?
3. To what extent, if any, do journalists perceive an authoritative advantage of social media usage and of developing themselves as influencers?

Based on the earlier outlined body of literature and description of the context, we will acknowledge that the number of users consuming news through social media is growing in the countries of our focus[55], as well as the number and influence of social media influencers.

Using social media in general entails a certain level of digital media literacy. Building on the outlined definitions of (digital) media literacy, defined as "the skills required to achieve digital competence"[56], this study will use this concept in the same meaning as 'digital competence'. **"Being digitally competent is more than being able to use the latest smartphone or computer software — it is about being able to use such digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way."**[57] The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens defines this concept as consisting of five key areas and 21 competences, ranging from **browsing and evaluating information, through engaging with it, to developing content while protecting personal data**[58].

In order to apply the concept of digital media literacy within the journalist community, we will also use the concept of '**networked journalism**', understood as a way of bridging the gap between old and new media. It "includes citizen journalism, interactivity, open-sourcing, wikis,

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48   IREX, Media Sustainability Index 2017, (accessed 1 December 2018).
49   Ibid.
50   European Still Distant, Reporters Without Borders, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
51   The pro-government Informer daily often smears critical outlets and reporters, claiming that they have links to mafia groups or foreign intelligence agencies, in Serbia, Freedom House, available at https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia (accessed 1 December 2018).
52   Media Ownership Monitor, Serbia, Reporters Without Borders, 2018 (accessed 1 December 2018).
53   EC Staff Working Document, Serbia 2018 Report (accessed 1 December 2018).

54   IREX, Media Sustainability Index, 2018 (accessed 1 December 2018).
55   Digital News Report 2017, Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 2017, Reuters Institute and University of Oxford (accessed 1 December 2018).
56   Digital Literacy European Commission Working Paper and Recommendations from Digital Literacy High-Level Expert Group, European Commission Staff Working Document, 2006, (accessed 1 December 2018).
57   The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, European Commission, 2016, (accessed 2 December 2018).
58   Ibid.

blogging, and **social networking, not as add-ons, but as an essential part of news production and distribution itself**."[59]

However, we will only look at the use of the concept at one end of this connection – the media's and journalists' readiness to "deliberately engage with the public at all stages"[60]. Beckett argued that "the public will help choose, research, produce, and disseminate journalism".[61] We will look into the issue of journalists' readiness to embrace and use this change.

The overall current media landscape will be seen as one dominated by a lack of freedom of expression and the increasing importance of social networks within which users are creating and passing information of various kinds and within which "[w]hat people are exposed to, thus, depends to a great extent on the interest and behavior of those with whom they connect via this medium"[62].

And to epitomize the trend brought by the growth of social networks, we will focus on the phenomenon of "social media influencers" (abbreviated to: influencers). The concept will be used inextricably with the terms 'opinion leaders', 'micro-celebrities' and 'self-brands', but will not include the concept of a marketer, i.e. a person with a clear connection with a business for which a marketer is working.

This study will define an **influencer as a person who has (an) account(s) on social media with a significant number of posts (entailing daily or frequent posting to the account), a significant following, and who shares 'expertise and knowledge (on a particular subject)'[63] in a manner that can be considered credible. This person can have a large number of followers, e.g. more than 50,000, or a group of other relevant experts in the field, important members of community, etc. following his/her account and should be considered to share authentic, genuine content.** Every social network user can assume the optional role and possible position of an influencer by sharing, liking and commenting on news and thus influence the knowledge and opinions of others. "A Canadian study found it was twice as likely that users preferred news links and recommendations from friends and family, as compared to journalists and news organizations."[64]

Thus, the study will attempt to answer the following:

Research question: To what extent, if any, does a journalist in their personal capacity engage with social networks as media platforms to disseminate and deliberate information?

Sub-questions:
1. What is Western Balkans journalists' level of digital competence and how does it influence their social media usage?

2. How do they perceive the publishing potential of social networks?
3. To what extent, if any, do journalists perceive an authoritative advantage of social media usage and are developing themselves as influencers?

This report will not deal directly with the business models of old and new media or marketing of influencers. Instead of asking how digital media audiences and social network users are getting news, we will ask: What are journalists in the Western Balkan region doing to promote their professional work and (re)connect with audiences? In a world where the public receives most of its information through social media, in the overall struggle to push out truthful information and combat disinformation or misinformation, we are looking at journalists as potential social media influencers. Research into new media dynamics in the light of the growth of social media in the four countries of our focus, is sparse. Research on the position of journalists in relation to the growth in social media and the opportunities it affords, especially their opinion on the usage of social networks in disseminating news has never been explored in the region, nor to the best of our knowledge, in Europe.

4. METHODOLOGY

Survey: *100 journalists from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to collect data on media literacy and social media habits;*
Elite in-depth interviews: *five influencer-journalists from all countries, to offer a different perspective on their social media experiences;*
Focus Groups: *three discussion and focus groups created along one denominator – their country of work – to observe the construction of opinions in journalists' every-day professional networks.*

4.1. Survey method

The primary goal of this study was to research media literacy and the social media habits of journalists in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Since the subject of our interest was a relatively narrow population group and we wanted to obtain general, self-reported answers, we thought that the optimal way to collect data was a systematic method developed to gather information from a number of individuals, such as a survey, as a simple data collection tool[65].

Specification of the research and survey questions is one of the key steps to ensuring quality[66]. As was outlined in the conceptual framework, we defined as key concepts digital competences (digital media literacy) and social media influencers, and the subdomains of their meaning[67], as well as empirical indicators for each concept[68]. In the top-down operationalisation process, we observed variables that are driven from the theories, due to the fact that the concepts have

59   SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World, Charlie Beckett, Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
60   Ibid.
61   Ibid.
62   How Gatekeeping Still Matters: Understanding Media Effects in an Era of Curated Flows, Kjerstin Thorson and Chris Wells, In Gatekeeping in Transition, edited by Timothy P. Vos and François Heinderyckx, New York: Routledge, in Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, 2018, (accessed 2 December 2018).
63   "Film Critics: Influencers or Predictors?" Journal of Marketing, Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M. Shugan, 1997.
64   "Persistence and Change in Social Media", Bernie Hogan and Anabel Quan-Haase, Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 2010, in News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).

65   Survey research methodology in management information systems: An assessment, Alain Pinsonneault and Kenneth Kraemer, Journal of Management Information Systems, 1993, in Fundamentals of Survey Research Methodology, Priscilla A. Glasow, Washington C3 Center McLean, Virginia, 2005, (accessed 2 December 2018).
66   Ibid.
67   The Cornerstones of Survey Research, Edith D. de Leeuw, Joop J. Hox, Department of Methodology & Statistics, Utrecht University, Don A. Dillman, Washington State University in International Handbook of Survey Methodology, Edited by Edith D. de Leeuw, Utrecht University, Joop J. Hox, Utrecht University, Don A. Dillman, Washington State University; The European Association of Methodology, 2008.
68   Ibid.

already been developed. We opted for testing the null hypothesis, claiming a negative answer to our research question[69]. The survey instrument (Appendix A) consists of a number of types of questions, as we were more interested in personal behaviours and personal opinions[70]. Additionally, as digital media literacy is a slippery concept, we did not want to take positions of absolute truth or falsehood, but rather to collect different understandings. We decided to conduct an online survey for the practical reason of the availability of respondents, its cost and flexibility in terms of the time needed and the simplicity of form, and so the questions were short, concise, and clearly presented because internet users scan text rather than read it carefully[71].

The sampling design was multi-stage, i.e. we first contacted journalists who had participated in one of the Robert Bosch Stiftung programmes and who had decided to remain in contact with the alumni network. At a later stage, it snowballed into a larger sample of connected individuals who are journalists.

To complement the downsides of the method, such as a lack of in-depth understanding, dubious self-reported answers, a lack of accuracy in the responses, etc., we conducted more comprehensive methods: five elite interviews and three focus groups interviewed. The pilot survey showed weaknesses that may be corrected in future research, such as a clearer and more straightforward definition of concepts. As all theories on this type of method insist that in order to obtain respondents' cooperation, but also following strict regulation of the newly implemented EU General Data Rule Policy, the survey was conducted through a survey website respecting EU General Data Protection Regulation[72] and participants were provided with an informed consent form to sign prior to participating.

4.2. Interview method

The elite interviews were semi-structured, aimed at providing "insight into dimensions that cannot easily be covered in a closed-ended questionnaire"[73]. We selected journalists who actively use social media platforms to promote their daily work and who have a significant following, thus who arguably have an influence among social media users. As the goal of this segment of the study is to explore in-depth opinions and thoughts, the interview method is likely to be the most effective one in providing a deep understanding of subjective experience[74], and in exploring individuals' different perceptions of the same phenomenon[75]. The most valuable feature of the method is that it provided us with an opportunity to 'gain insights into people's behaviour', which is not possible to obtain through any other method[76]. This method is considered to be

69   Fundamentals of Survey Research Methodology, Priscilla A. Glasow, Washington C3 Center McLean, Virginia, 2005, (accessed 2 December 2018).
70   Ibid.
71   Assessing internet questionnaires: The online pretest lab, L. Gräf, 2002, in Online social sciences, B. Batinic, U. D. Reips, M. Bosnjak, & A. Werner (Eds.), Hogrefe & Huber, Seattle, in International Handbook of Survey Methodology, Katja Lozar Manfreda and Vasja Vehovar, University of Ljubljana, Edited by Edith D. de Leeuw, Utrecht University, Joop J. Hox, Utrecht University, Don A. Dillman, Washington State University; The European Association of Methodology, 2008, (accessed 2 December 2018).
72   GDPR.
73   Institut National D'Etudies Demographique, (accessed 2 December 2018).
74   An introduction to qualitative research, Uwe Flick, London: Sage Publications, 2009; Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction, David Silverman, Sage, 2001.
75   Individual and group interviewing, George Gaskell, 2000, in Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook, Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (Eds.), London: Sage Publications.
76   Doing psychological research: Gathering and analysing data, Nicky Hayes, Open University Press, 2000.

more appropriate if there is a possibility that subjective experience and perception can differ among participants[77]. Furthermore, these interviewees were treated separately for the practical reasons of geographical distance and time constraints in organising their participation in any other way. We similarly conducted semi-structured, normal conversations and interviews in order to avoid prescribed rigid adherence to the interview schedule[78], and to leave space for soliciting 'spontaneous and in-depth responses'[79] and richer details with follow-up questions[80].

Bearing in mind that the topic is new and under-researched, we think that it was necessary to allow the interviewees to express their viewpoints, opinions and ideas in their own words[81], leaving space for unexpected topics to emerge. The semi-structured questionnaires served as an interview plan, as the backgrounds of the interviewees determined additional specific questions. Although most of the process of self-branding takes place within an individual realm, the social reaction leads to either its success or failure. In order to clarify the dynamics of a person's decision process in engaging personally with social media, we needed to understand the creation of meaning that happens in a group discussion within a newsroom or a journalists' association. "[P]eople's knowledge and attitudes are not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions"[82]. That is the reason why the methods of a survey and elite in-depth interviews were complemented with another method – focus group discussions.

4.3. Focus group method

A focus group is "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment"[83]. People who share certain similar or same characteristics, gathered in a group in a discussion focused on a single topic, provide qualitative data[84] and this differs from the in-depth interviews not only by the number of participants in a single discussion, but, more importantly, it provides another quality – richness of the qualitative data stemming from the group discussion. Thus, the more comprehensive definition of a focus group method is that it is a "research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher"[85]. This means that our study did not only look to elicit opinions from each participant, but rather discourse constructed through a group discussion.

However, to explore the decision-making process and the construction of meaning of social networks, we created groups along one denominator – their country of work (which may significantly differ in the intensity and ways social media is used), and so we consider the groups as homogenous. We see homogeneous focus groups as the setting for the expression of partici-

77   In-depth interviewing, John M. Johnson, 2002, in J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein (Eds.), Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
78   Qualitative methods in social research, Kristin G. Esterberg, Boston: McGraw- Hill, 2002.
79   Semi-structured interviewing in practice-close research, Jennifer Baumbusch, Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing, 2010.
80   Individual and group interviewing, George Gaskell, 2000, in Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook, Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (Eds.), London: Sage Publications.
81   Qualitative methods in social research, Kristin G. Esterberg, Boston: McGraw- Hill, 2002; What is qualitative research?, Martyn Hammersley, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
82   Qualitative Research: Introducing Focus Groups, Jenny Kitzinger, in British Medical Journal, 1995.
83   Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, Richard A. Krueger, Sage, 1994.
84   Ibid.
85   Focus Groups, David Morgan, In Annual Review of Sociology, 1996.

pants' identity[86], i.e. participants will be firstly viewed as journalists from a certain country. "Culture and beliefs are, after all, the product of collective thought and action"[87], thus we decided to group journalists from the same country or similar countries in terms of media freedom, same language background and overall media landscape, and we focused on the way the participants collaboratively responded to the activity challenge and the questions posed.

Due to the nature of social media, we decided to understand journalists not only as belonging to the production side of media consumption, but also as those who are on the receiving end of this process. Thus, this part of our study builds on a vast body of audience research literature[88]. However, due to the time and financial limits of our study, these focus groups were not intended to try to create quasi-naturalistic situations and mimic everyday conversations, but rather to explore the professional stance of a group towards a certain new issue. A downside to using focus groups is the lack of representation of the whole population. There were challenges of emerging leaders of the group, participants who tended to follow what seems to be a dominant opinion or who just refused to participate and it was tackled through an experienced approach.

5. RESULTS

Survey: The observed discrepancies between 80% of journalists thinking that people are interested in their articles, 58% [strongly] disagreeing that promoting their work is the job of their company and not theirs, and only 26% saying they always promote their work.
Focus groups: A trend was observed of a decline in understanding, knowledge and a positive attitude about the use of social networks in the promotion of journalism, as we moved from the first focus group, composed of international journalists, through the second, composed of journalists from the Western Balkan countries, to the third, composed of journalists from Croatia.
Elite in-depth interviews: Well-planned activities were observed, strategies and the successful execution of social media influence by the interviewees were thoroughly examined.

The survey was conducted during two months in mid-2018. A total of 97 journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia answered the questionnaire.	
Gender	62.5% female
Age	4% / 25 49% / 25 – 34 years old 40% / 35 – 44 years old 9% / 45 +
Work experience	35% / 6–10 years 51% / more than 10 years
Type of employment	10% / work as freelancers 86% / full-time employed
Type of media	50% / work for a news website 35% / work for a TV station

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86   The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding, David Morley, London: British Film Institute, 1980.
87   Seeing and Believing: The Influence of Television, Greg Philo, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
88   Talk on Television: The Critical Reception of Audience Discussion Programmes, S. M. Livingstone, and P.K. Lunt, London: Routledge, 1994; Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communication Research', S. M. Livingstone and P.K. Lunt, in Journal of Communication, 1996.

To offer an overview of the collected data, we will outline the answers in accordance with the research sub-questions.

1. What is the social media literacy of journalists in Western Balkans and how does it influence their social media usage?

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA	
Facebook profile	91%
Facebook page	49%
Twitter	68%
YouTube	67%
Instagram	64%

HAVE YOU EVER HAD TRAINING IN USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PROMOTION OF YOUR STORIES?

17.39% (16): YES
82.61% (76): NO

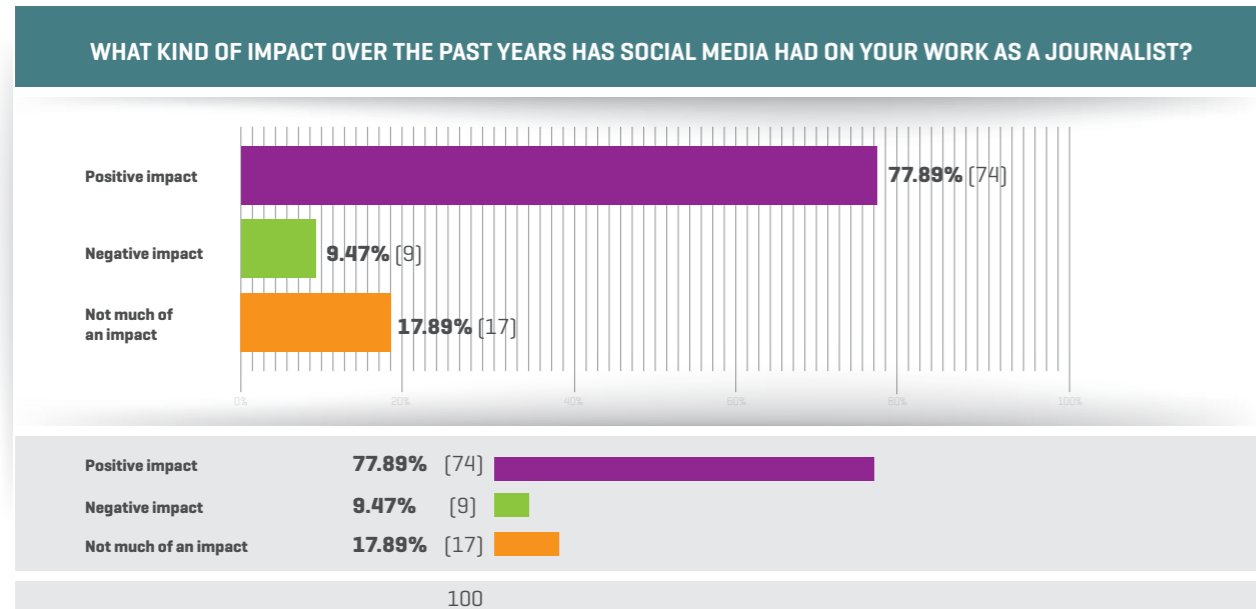|			
NO	82.61%	76	
YES	17.39%	16	
		92	
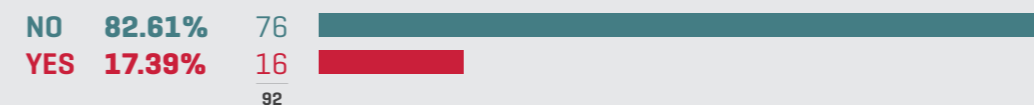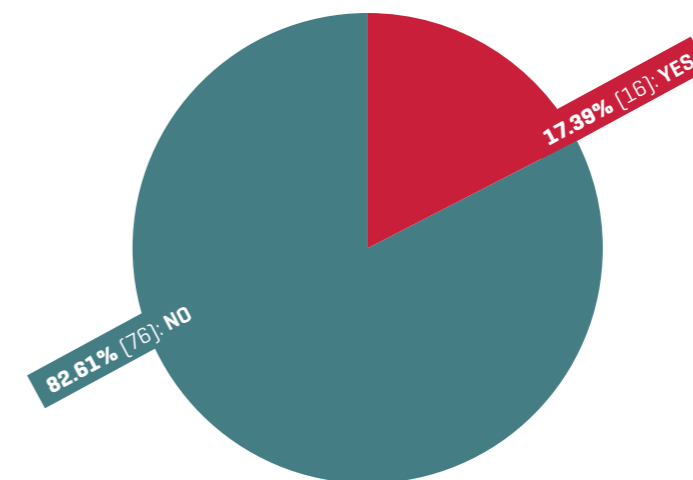
When asked what they use social networks for, 91% responded that it was to collect information, and 87.5% for communication. Only 29.5% of respondents had training in the use of social media. However, the majority of respondents said that this training was part of another course, rather than one focusing solely on social media. "I have learned how to use Facebook in order to find some people, research companies and groups… it was a short tutorial during a seminar about investigative journalism," said one of the respondents in their comment on the question.

When asked how often they use social media for research, 46% of journalists said that they use it only sometimes, while only 13% reported that they always use it when working on their stories. "I use the networks I mentioned to get information, but not as a valid source of information. So, just to search for some initial information that I am checking," explained one journalist. However, when asked to comment and explain, only a few chose to leave an answer – and when they did, it was mostly general: "Facebook and Google ads".

2. How do they perceive the publishing potential of social networks?

In a multiple-choice question about the purpose of their use of social media, 62.5% of respondents said that they use social media to promote their own work, which is less than the 71% who said that they share information at all.

WHAT KIND OF IMPACT OVER THE PAST YEARS HAS SOCIAL MEDIA HAD ON YOUR WORK AS A JOURNALIST?

Positive impact	**77.89%** [74]	
Negative impact	**9.47%** [9]	
Not much of an impact	**17.89%** [17]	

Positive impact	**77.89%** [74]	
Negative impact	**9.47%** [9]	
Not much of an impact	**17.89%** [17]	
100		

The majority reported using Facebook for this purpose, and a few commented that they had been instructed to do so by their companies. A significant number of comments when answer-

I DO NOT SHARE MY STORIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS I DON'T WANT TO LOOK INTRUSIVE.

6.67% [6] **5** (Strongly agree)
26.67% [24] **1** (Strongly disagree)
15.56% [14]: **4**
24.44% [22]: **2**
26.67% [24]: **3**

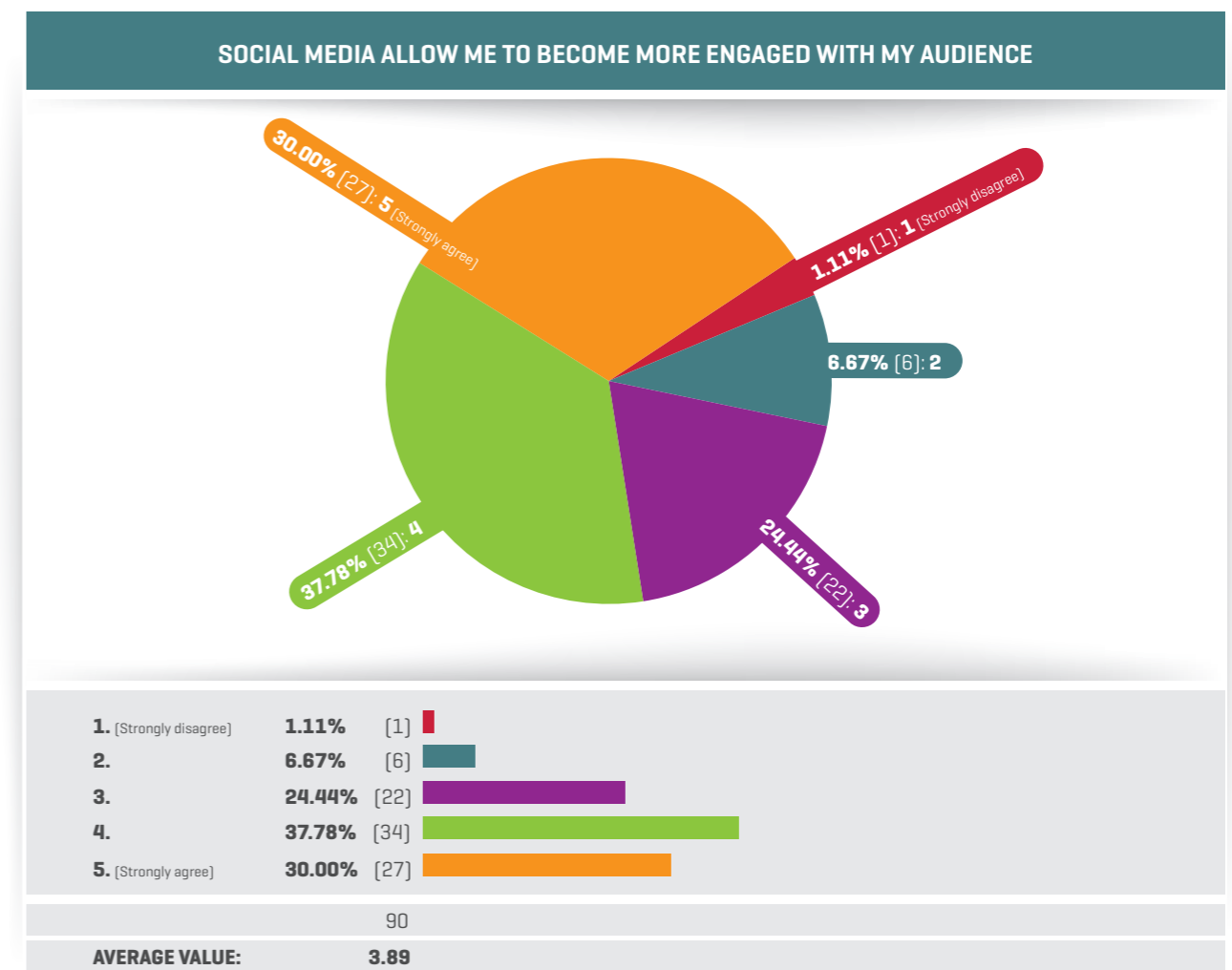|			
1. [Strongly disagree]	**26.67%**	[24]	
2.	**24.44%**	[22]	
3.	**26.67%**	[24]	
4.	**15.56%**	[14]	
5. [Strongly agree]	**6.67%**	[6]	
90			
AVERAGE VALUE:	**2.51**		
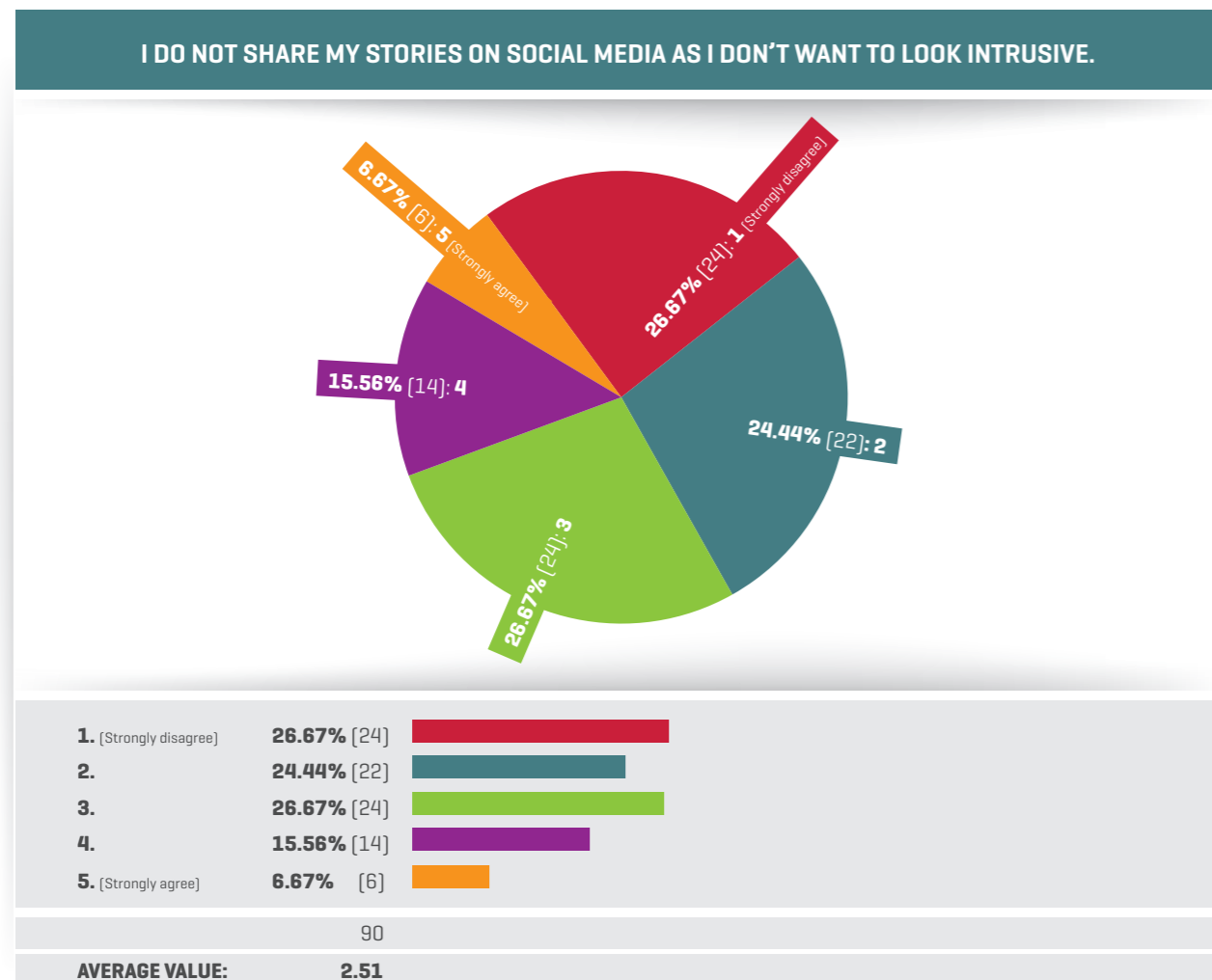
ing this question indicated that the respondents, in fact, used their own and their company's media outlets interchangeably. Thus, drawing conclusions about the level of personal engagement in promoting journalistic work in a personal capacity from this question is challenging. We will try to explain this answer through a focus group discussion in the later part of the study. We will also reflect on the data that 51% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement: "I do not share my stories on social media as I don't want to look intrusive." Here we have to put a caveat: it is possible that some journalists had difficulty understanding the question, due to the fact that the poll was conducted in English and there are significant language differences regarding this concept. The concept will also be discussed in the subsequent chapters. Furthermore, when asked whether they own a personal social media account which they use only for professional purposes, only a few of the respondents answered positively: only 4% have a professional Facebook account or Facebook page; only 6% use Twitter in their personal capacity but for professional purposes; only 1.5% use YouTube in this way; and 18% have a personal blog which they use for their job.

There is a stark difference between journalists who use social networks personally, more-or-less like any other social media user, and the number of those who use social networks professionally.

In the focus group discussions, we clarified, to some extent, these discrepancies between the 80% that think that people are interested in their articles, the 58% who (strongly) disagree that promoting their work is the job of their company and not theirs, and the only 26% who say that they always promote their work.

3. To what extent, if any, do journalists perceive an authoritative advantage in social media usage and in developing themselves as influencers?

SOCIAL MEDIA ALLOW ME TO BECOME MORE ENGAGED WITH MY AUDIENCE

30.00% [27]: **5** (Strongly agree)
1.11% [1]: **1** (Strongly disagree)
6.67% [6]: **2**
37.78% [34]: **4**
24.44% [22]: **3**

1. [Strongly disagree]	**1.11%**	[1]	
2.	**6.67%**	[6]	
3.	**24.44%**	[22]	
4.	**37.78%**	[34]	
5. [Strongly agree]	**30.00%**	[27]	
90			
AVERAGE VALUE:	**3.89**		

When asked to provide examples, less than 40% mentioned social media handles or the names of influencers. Less than a fifth of the interviewees answered the question: What in your opinion makes someone influential in social media? The answers, dominantly, refer to the size of the dedicated audience. However, some answered that authenticity, creativity, controversy and humour may be important.

IN YOUR OPINION, SHOULD JOURNALISTS BE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS?

44.71% (38): NO

55.29% (47): YES
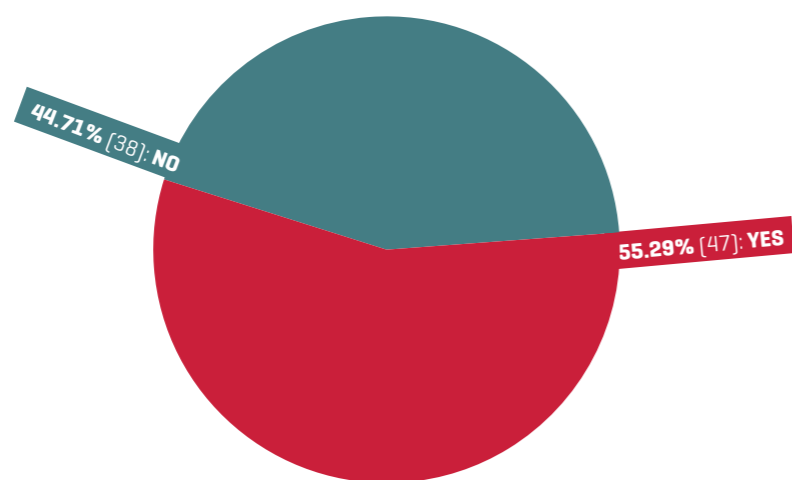
YES	55.29%	47
NO	44.71%	38
		85

There was a dominantly negative sentiment related to the concept of influencers. The same sentiment dominated discussion among the homogenous focus group of journalists from one of the countries of our research. This will be discussed within the focus group analysis. The question of whether journalists should embark on an experience of being social media influencers was answered negatively by 44.7% of journalists. The dominant explanation for such a position, apart from the negative sentiment, is related to understanding professional standards and the work of influencers. "Journalists should refrain from being too open with their positions, on any given subject, (unless it is a clear violation of law, or human rights abuse) since it can negatively impact their work," one of the respondents said.

On the other hand, the majority that think that reporters should be more present in the sphere of social media explain that it would 'heal the society'. "I think journalists, writers and young intellectuals should appropriate the term 'influencer' away from the almost literal demimonde of 'shoppers and travellers' who have a monopoly on discourse at the moment, and rebrand it in a smart way which will lead us to visibility and influence in the public discourse."

Focus groups provide a better insight into the collected data. The denomination between the groups proved to have significance, as we observed stark differences between groups and almost a trend of decline in understanding and knowledge of the use of social networks in the promotion of journalism, as we moved from the first "international" focus group, through the second "regional" focus group, to the third "national" focus group.

During the first focus group discussion, consisting of journalists mainly from Germany and Hungary, and then from the United States, Russia and Armenia, we observed a high level of familiarity with the potentials of social media publishing. Dominated by journalists from Western media landscapes, the discussion led to positive conclusions on the necessity of journalists being present within social media networks and even a request for higher professional standards and greater inclusiveness of journalists' social media circles. Participants in the focus group from Germany and the United States had no trouble understanding the term 'influencer', they easily named journalists whom they consider to represent the concept, and had a clearer justification of journalists' use of social media in promoting their work. We noticed significant differences in understanding the value of social networks for journalists between those journalists from countries considered to have high media freedoms and those who come from states lacking media freedoms.

The second group was composed of journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, i.e. the countries of our interest. Initially, some of the journalists were resistant to the idea that journalists should promote their work through social networks, especially in their personal capacity. However, investigative journalists who had been trained on the topic explained their experience and led the discussion in the opposite direction. They offered positive examples of journalists who are influential on social media and sought explanations as to why they themselves do not follow these (good) examples.

The third group, composed of Croatian journalists, had a different sentiment. Even though several journalists reported that their news organisations use social media, and one said that he uses social media to promote his work, a negative sentiment towards this potential prevailed. They struggled to define the term 'influencer', taking mostly a negative position towards the concept, defining it mostly as micro-celebrities advertising various products. The group remained rather confused about the topic and resistant to the idea of journalists using social media to promote their work.

The interviewees we had elite in-depth interviews with, as rare outliers, represent journalists who use social networks in a manner that makes them well-known, respected, read and influential in their respected countries and in the region that shares a common language. During the focus group discussions with the group of journalists from the region and from Croatia, their names were either brought up by the focus group participants or immediately recognised by them.

We think that having them as examples of good journalistic practice in social media usage offers evidence for our argument that journalists in the Western Balkans can use social networks to disseminate their stories and discuss topics, thus becoming social media influencers who contribute to a better-informed public. However, through the survey and focus group discussions we observed different behaviour and opposing opinions. In the next chapter we will discuss the reasoning behind this observation.

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the results we collected in the research, we argue that journalists in the Western Balkans are not using social media to promote their work, at least not in a clearly intentioned, professional and organised way, such as would be counted networked journalism. Journalists who do this in a planned, structured and standardised manner, so as to create a self-branded influence, are rare.

We found that there are three reasons for this. First: the lack of engagement with social media by media practitioners comes out of a lack of digital media literacy. Second: a culture of development of a self-branded influence is incongruent with the general culture of the observed countries and with journalists' perception of their professional culture. Third: the lack of freedom of expression is influencing journalists' activities, even in spheres which are seemingly free, i.e. at least out of the direct control of the state authorities. In the following chapters we will outline the evidence for these claims.

6.1. Lack of digital competences

Journalists in the Western Balkans lack training in the use of social networking sites for promotion of their work, both to raise awareness and to provide them with the tools to achieve results. Training, incentives and standards should be offered by media outlets, as relying on personal initiatives is proving insufficient. Offering monetisation opportunities by the biggest tech companies and the owners of social networks, even as small incentives in small markets, would be of great significance for journalists' social media presence and ultimately independence.

We opted to consider the definition of media literacy as "the ability to access, understand and create information"[89] as outdated; in focus groups discussions we challenged journalists' 'digital competency'. And we observed a lack of skills among Western Balkan journalists, especially in terms of: interacting and sharing through digital technologies; collaborating through digital technology; and especially maintaining a digital identity[90].

All the participants of focus groups reported using social media to keep up with what their networks are talking about, to research and understand the informal relations and social networks of the people they are reporting on and to receive scoops from users. Although there is an abundance of talk on misinformation, journalists from the Western Balkans did not bring this up for discussion as one of the features of information gathering through social networks, whilst journalists from Germany and United States did. The trend can be observed globally: "Only 11% of journalists use social media verification tools, though most (71%) use social media to find new story ideas."[91]

If we focus on the aspect of information creation, i.e. interacting and sharing through digital technologies, we notice a stark contrast between the regional and the national focus groups on

one side and journalists/influencers on the other. In the in-depth interviews they explained that they use social media not only for collecting information, but also to 'check the pulse' of their audience, see what they care about most and how they feel about their content, their stories. More importantly, following the definition of networked journalism, they reported that they also engage with the public, mostly with those that react to their articles on their social media profiles and occasionally respond to users' comments.

"I see regular communication with my followers as a matter of mutual respect. However, I do not reply to all the comments, especially to the ones which are written as firm statements that I strongly disagree with." – Adis Nadarevic

"Sometimes we ask for some contact. We use crowdsourcing, we ask people to help us." – Stevan Dojcinovic

"[N]urturing forms of reciprocity—seeking and sharing in a give-and-take fashion of favour and goodwill—could be crucial to engendering greater trust, community, and connectedness."[92] And most of those surveyed and the journalists in the discussions do not offer forms of reciprocity through social networks.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE STORIES YOU REPORTED?

Never	11.46%	[11]
Sometimes	35.42%	[34]
Often	11.46%	[11]
Usually	15.63%	[15]
Always	26.04%	[25]

Never	11.46%	[74]
Sometimes	35.42%	[74]
Often	11.46%	[74]
Usually	15.63%	[9]
Always	26.04%	[17]
	100	

The majority of the regional and national focus groups' participants reported simply never thinking about sharing their stories. They noted the importance of preserving their personal social media accounts and privacy protection for personal non-job-related contacts. Western Balkan journalists demonstrated knowledge of the popularity and affordability of social media. They said that they would be more professionally active on Twitter if it were popular in their country.

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89   Definition by Ofcom, 2003 in "Internet Literacy among children and young people", Sonia Livingstone, Magdalena Bober, Ellen Helsper, LSE Research Online, London, 2005.

90   The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, European Commission, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016, (accessed 3 December 2018).
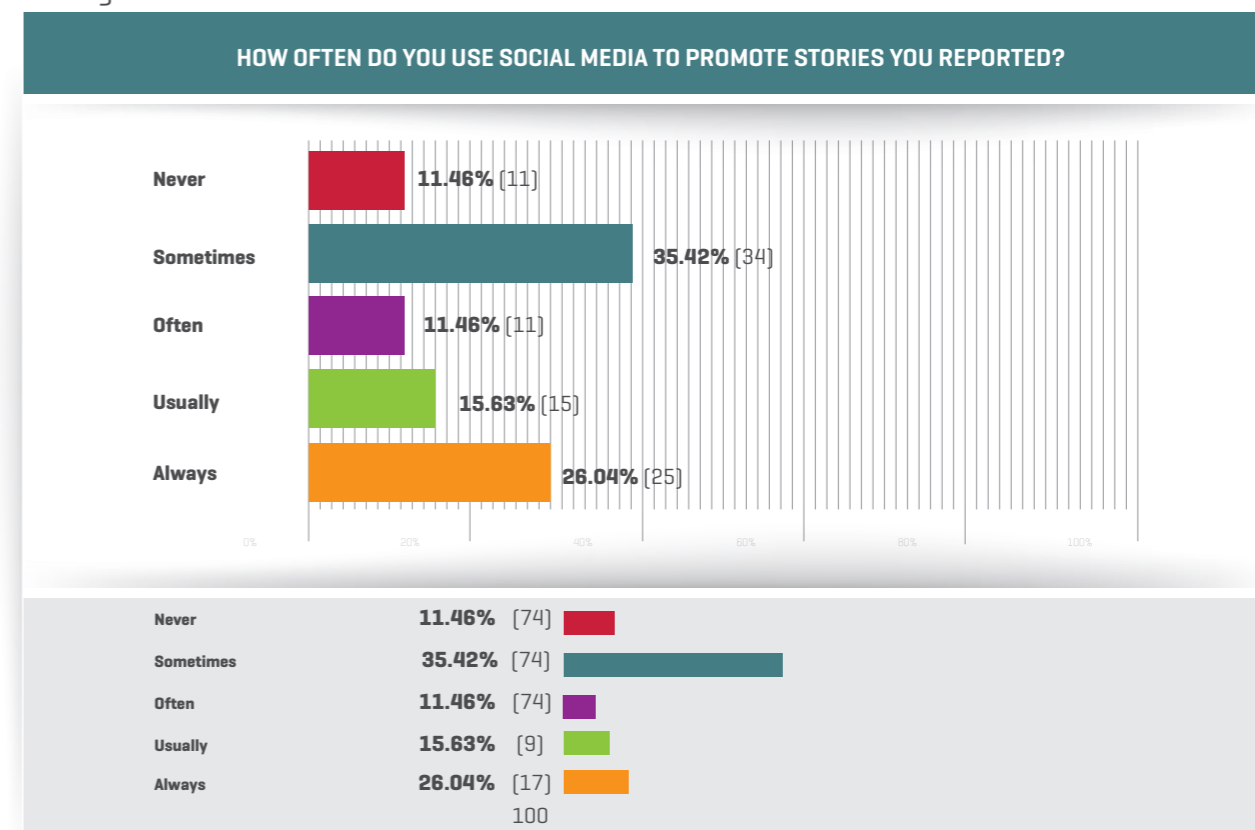
91   The State of Technology in Global Newsrooms, International Centre for Journalists, 2017.

92   Reciprocity and the News: The Role of Personal and Social Media Reciprocity in News Creation and Consumption, Avery E. Holton, Mark Coddington, Seth C. Lewis, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, *International Journal of Communication*, 2015, (accessed 3 December 2018).

The explanations for the lack of usage of Facebook for professional purposes are: they do not want to 'bore', 'disturb' or 'annoy' their friends with the work they do. Additionally, the homogenous group of journalists from Croatia agreed to a significant extent that there is no point in doing that personally, and that there is even a risk of overburdening your personal account.

[National focus group] - "My articles are anyway shared on the Facebook pages of the media outlet I work for, news websites already have a large following, and I personally don't have that amount of followers... it will reach people anyway, without me publishing it." – "I think that if you publish your own or somebody else's articles 17 times a day, Facebook's algorithm will hide you because it will recognise you are sharing something time and again, and you'll end up without anybody seeing you."

The lack of journalists' familiarity with the dynamics of social media algorithms is best observed in contrast with influencer-journalists.
"The more visible you are, the more your media is visible. The more followers you have, the more people you will share your story with. For media it is a good thing that their journalists are popular." – Stevan Dojcinovic

As one of the key reasons for journalists not being active in sharing their content on social network sites, we recognise a lack of interest and support for this type of activity by media outlets. We observed a lack of awareness that the personal dissemination of news through social media may be more significant than traditional media, as it could refer to content "shared by known others"[93]. Most media outlets and newsrooms do not have codes of conduct or any kind of rulebook on the use of social media.

[Regional focus group] – "The newsroom I work in requires every journalist to have an official fan page" – "Do you personally maintain the page?" – "Yes, but we have no publishing rules and procedures, and I think we should have them, because in this way some people never publish anything." – "When my media outlet just launched the idea of journalists' fan pages, we had a bonus on our monthly salary. And people were really active. They are not implementing that anymore."

The same applies to almost all the influencer-journalists we interviewed. They said that it was their friends, and not media outlets, who nudged them to use social networking sites. Klauski is the only influencer-journalist who reported an increase in his personal value and a number of job offers once he had established his personal brand on social media.

"[My employers] are pushing the authors to be as present as possible on the networks. They recognised me and took me over from Index.hr. [...]The better brand you make, the more recognisable you will be to employers. I changed several newsrooms and I wasn't happy with that because I thought people would not recognise me. Then people told me that I am recognised as an author. People don't care which media I write for." **–** Tomislav Klauski

Globally, the circumstances are not that different. "Training in posting stories and comments on social media is offered in 39% of newsrooms, but only 22% of journalists say it is helpful."[94] An increase in the value of a journalist's personal brand or an influencer's account should be en-

93   Political News in the News Feed: Learning Politics from Social Media, Leticia Bode, Mass Communication and Society, 2016.
94   Ibid.

abled through the monetisation possibilities of various social networks. All of the respondents in our research expressed little or no knowledge about monetisation possibilities. Some confused this with crowdfunding opportunities. Only a few journalists in each focus group reported being aware of the limitation of monetisation opportunities.

[International focus group] – "In Hungary I think it's such a special case, because this is a small language, so if you are a blogging in Hungarian you have a small audience you can reach, actually. So that's why that marketing potential is really small"

While noticing that there is an admitted lack of knowledge of how to present journalistic work in a way that is attractive to a larger audience on a social network, contributing to our argument regarding journalists lacking digital competence, we have to emphasise the high awareness that large social networks do not work for the benefit of small markets and journalists in small markets by offering clear instructions on how to monetise content published on certain social media.

[National focus group] - "I was shocked that my nephew, who got a million views on his stop-motion videos of his Lego toys, is now making serious earnings. [...] YouTube just told him: Ok, you will be our partner and for a start you will get 2% of the advertising revenue." – "Could a journalist do something similar?" – "I think that would be an issue, it would be like getting into a grey zone, because..." – "Who would want to sponsor you as a journalist and in what way? " – "It would be an optimal model for journalists. If there was a platform that would buy our news and would show ads along with it in such a way that the advertisers could not influence the editorial policy, that would be wonderful. There is a problem with the market size if a journalist wanted to record videos on his own and if he wanted to live from that. The market in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro is too small."

There is a need to clarify and discuss the ethics of this opportunity, as well.

"As a joke, I put as my cover photo on my Facebook profile "this is a place for your ad". [...] In a way, 90% of what I do there, what I comment on, is about that [the work of the Government]. Whether it is possible to monetise it, I am not sure. Because the public interest is like the public good, you cannot monetise it." – Slobodan Georgiev

6.2. Incongruence of cultures

The culture of individualism underpinning the development of social media influencers is lacking in post-communist countries. This incongruence of cultures is further complicated by issues of journalistic ethical standards, such as not mixing facts with opinions, and understanding that social media engagement requires both.
In our opinion, journalists ready to be singled out leaders, who offer a well-balanced and transparent mix of facts and opinions providing context, could bring a significant and necessary change to the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The creation and growth of social media influencers are based on "principles and practices distinct to the 'promotional culture' [Wernick 1992] of advanced consumer capitalism."[95] Khamis et al. see the historical logic in this phenomenon, where individuals try to retain and assert

95   Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers, Susie Khamis and Lawrence Ang & Raymond Welling, Celebrity Studies, 2016, (accessed 1 December 2018).

personal agency in circumstances where global capitalism is being coupled with new communication technologies. A system that is characterised by individualism, i.e. the "loosely knit social framework in a society in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only"[96], is still historically new in the region of the former Yugoslavia, which had communism (socialism) as its central ideology for half a century. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in Western Europe or the United States, a surge of social media self-brands "harmonizes with neoliberal notions of individual efficacy and responsibility; and rests on capitalist faith in enterprising, resourceful and self-directed labor."[97] The same phenomenon is coming to a different cultural context, which has been characterised by collectivism, occurring when there is a "tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups; they expect their in-group (relatives, clan, organizations) to look after them, and in exchange for that owe absolute loyalty to it."[98]

While discussing why they are not sharing their work on social media, journalists in the regional and national focus groups said that they do not want to stand out, brag or bother their friends. They promote through their personal social media only those stories that they find very important or those they are proud of.

[Regional focus group] – "I share the articles of my colleagues, but mine – not that much. I still do have some old-fashioned or... I do not feel comfortable to promote my own work. [...] because I was raised in the period when nothing mine was good enough." – "I also share much more frequently the work of my colleagues than mine, probably for the same reason of this 'self-promotion'" – "I don't share anything of mine on Facebook, [...] I see it as standing out with your work." – "I share it because I want as many people to read it as possible, because it is not only my work, there is a story. I don't consider it self-promotion, but promotion of a story. If I am promoting a journalist's story, I am not promoting the journalist, but the story."

[National focus group] – "Honestly, I'm not a fan of sharing my own articles, except when I go crazy. I think it's stupid to promote yourself." – "I have that feeling of being uncomfortable, especially if I would need to pay, sponsor, I would have a feeling that I was pushing myself forward too much, unnecessarily."

These discussions were dominated by conclusions that media outlets should, as some already do, push for a bigger presence on social networking sites, letting journalists retain their privacy on social media and separating themselves from the promotion of their work. That result from the discussion is in line with the offered general definition of collectivism. However, contributing to an earlier argument regarding the lack of media literacy, apart from a few investigative journalists, the participants seemed generally uninformed, though anecdotally aware of the fact that Facebook has altered its algorithms to focus the news feed on personal interactions, consequently curbing the presence and impact of media brands[99].

The biggest cultural difference we have observed in attitudes towards social media promotion is the one offered by freelancers from Germany and the United States on one hand, but by very few freelancers from the four countries of the region.

96   Managing Cultural Differences, Robert T. Moran, Philip R. Harris, Sarah V. Moran, Elsevier, 2011.
97   Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers, Susie Khamis and Lawrence Ang & Raymond Welling, Celebrity Studies, 2016, (accessed 1 December 2018).
98   Managing Cultural Differences, Robert T. Moran, Philip R. Harris, Sarah V. Moran, Elsevier, 2011.
99   Facebook Focuses News Feed On Friends And Family, Curbing The Reach Of Brands And Media, Chaykowski, Kathleen, Forbes, January 2018, (accessed 28 November 2018).

[International focus group] – "It's necessary if you are starting as a freelancer. [...] And I think it's not only to promote yourself, but also to let people know where you are. So, if I go to China, or to India, I want to show different things, but it's also that I want news media outlets to know that I'm there ... If you're not posting your articles, no one will see your work." – "It helped me professionally, giving my content a voice. Having this amazing profile and so many followers, being freelancer was a lot easier. I got invited to talk on radio just because somebody on Twitter, some editor, contacted with me or [...] I got a request from Italy, from journalists doing cross-border projects." – "So, I've been contacted for international media outlets regarding the situation in Hungary so many times, so I made also short comments and statements about it through my Twitter account and direct messages."

[National focus group] – "This summer I was having lunch on an island, on a terrace, and I saw a ship burning. I took a photo with my mobile phone and asked the port authorities what was going on. [...] I didn't share it with any newsroom, I just shared it on Facebook. And two or three colleagues who work at TV stations called me asking to use the photo, and I allowed them."

The last example shows journalists, even freelancers, taking on the role of one of many citizen-reporters rather than using social media to present themselves as influencer-journalists, who are breaking the news and who personally deserve attention for that. Through all three focus groups, broadcast journalists seemed more present on social media due to the initiative of their companies.

Further discussion on social media influencers somewhat unsurprisingly brought mostly negative sentiments towards the concept, especially in the nationally homogenous focus group. Answering the question of whether journalists can/should be social media influencers, Croatian journalists struggled to define the term. Seeing it mostly as negative, they argued that being an influencer-journalist would go against ethical journalism.

[National focus group] – "The term is used for people who are selling something, thus they get money." – "Maybe we have forgotten something here. I think that being an influencer is a profession. And a profession means that you receive money for doing something." – "But sharing information because you think it should be shared is not the same thing as sharing because you are being paid to share it."

Academic research suggests that on the other side of the communication channel, the audiences can easily define influencers/opinion leaders. "These are one or more people who are particularly active in their social media flows, who update frequently, post news and links to the original source, and also often comment on the shared news. These people also, according to the interviewees, bring context to news articles."[100] Most investigative journalists from the regional group, who earlier reported having attended some sort of training on the use of social media and had somewhat planned and organised social media communication in their newsrooms, led the discussion in a way that left no room for dilemma about the term, and the other participants agreed.

[Regional focus group] – "My editor-in-chief, Sloba[101], tweeted last year something about an incident that happened and right after his tweet, Minister of the Interior Dacic reacted and Prime

100   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, (accessed 1 December 2018).
101   Sloba Georgiev, one of our elite interviewees.

Minister Vucic quoted his tweet in front of the live broadcasting cameras [...]. In that sense, he is influential, making the Prime Minister show up in front of the press."

Interestingly, influencer-journalists do not necessarily see themselves as representative of the concept.

"As much as I dislike being called an influencer, I am glad to see my thoughts and ideas endorsed, welcomed and adopted by others." – Adis Nadarevic
"My job is to influence through my articles, so I am an opinion maker. My job as an author is to state opinions. Influencer? – no, because those are starlets who advertise hotels."– Tomislav Klauski
"Influencers function in some other industries. [...] But in these post-democracies, people are not interested [in what we write about]. Or maybe we are not 'selling' well enough." – Slobodan Georgiev

Although even the influencers themselves see the negative aspects of the concept, audiences find influencers useful in navigating the overwhelming world of everyday information: "Some respondents stated they have made individual choices to enhance the flow of news in their feed, for instance, actively choosing to follow news organizations or individual journalists."[102] Negative sentiment over the term influencer was observed among the international focus group of journalists as well. However, they questioned whether the general ethics of journalistic culture are congruent with the cultures of social media influencers.

[International focus group] – "If I think in Hungary about influencers, I would say the most popular ones are those who also express some kind of opinion, so not only sharing the facts but also putting something behind it. And, for me, that's a little bit problematic because on our site we are always really careful about, you know, that everything that is published has to be based on facts, so I don't feel that I'm the influencer in this sense because I'm only publishing the facts." – "But putting facts in context – it's already part of our job, to explain it and to make it compelling."

Western Balkan influencer-journalists mostly agree on this. Adding personal opinions to the information one shares is 'what gets people interested'.

"What I usually share is my comments, which are often written in a sarcastic tone, and links to my articles with the aim of promoting my work." – Adis Nadarevic.
"They are journalists, I am a columnist. It is a different thing, people are more passionate about it. People would rather follow an author like me than a journalist who is bringing some serious news." – Tomislav Klauski

Stepping further away from the basic journalistic ethical formula – "comment is free, but facts are sacred"[103] – to provide context, seems to be what audiences are looking for on social media. "It, therefore, seems that many of the interviewees have identified the function of filtering, interpreting and decoding which opinion leaders can offer. This seems to stem from an awareness of a particular need for help in orienting oneself within the news media landscape."[104]

102   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, [accessed 1 December 2018].
103   CP Scott Centenary Essay, see more at The Guardian, [accessed 4 December 2018].
104   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage, Informa UK, 2018, [accessed 1 December 2018].

Journalists from the nationally homogenous focus group did not see that assisting someone to navigate the news media landscape would be necessary or useful, as the audience's trust and allegiance, in their opinion, only depends on the brand of a media outlet.

[Regional focus group] - "There is still only trust in the brand. It means that if I work for media X, which used to be considered *red*, quite frequently it doesn't matter what I have written and who I am, but that it's for media X." – "I hope in the end people still read the content and then, based on it, build trust." – "People only want to have a journalist who says things the way people want to hear it."

Academic research still suggests that engagement with an individual journalist may lead to increased trust among the audience. "In other words, individual news consumers may operate partly on the implicit expectation that if they provide journalists with sustained, regular attention, those journalists will reciprocate with quality, worthwhile content"[105]. And influencer-journalists, based on their experience, agree.

"I carried with me more serious audiences and more serious advertisers, whichever media outlet I went to [worked for]. I carry more credibility and specific value to the media I work for than they had without me." – Tomislav Klauski
"The thing is to use the platform for your own journalistic goals and not to be drawn onto the platform just as a user." – Slobodan Georgiev

When we argue that the historically rooted culture of collectivism is incongruent with social media trends of individualistic development, it would be a fair point to question whether audiences in the same region would be interested in what singled-out leaders and influencers have to say on their social media accounts. Anecdotally, we can claim a slow and steady change in audiences' behaviour as we follow a surge in social media influencers in the field of marketing.

6.3. Lack of media freedom and the affordability of social networks

Although social media networks are perceived as free from direct political influence and control of local political power centers and control; Journalists mostly use social media to receive information from sources. Getting information out to the public through social networks, although seen as free, is perceived as not financially sustainable. The lack of media freedom impedes the production of valuable content, thus journalists who work in politically controlled newsrooms do not feel proud to share the information they produce. Those who build their social media presence use it incidentally as a safety net once their content is banned on traditional media.

Journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia often work under tough conditions, lacking freedom and with serious political and economic pressures. Social media is becoming, as some journalists suggested, a rare oasis where they, as well as other citizens, can get information that is not instructed or directed by the authorities.

As reported by a significant number of our interlocutors, social media is frequently used as a safe haven by sources who want to share information with a particular journalist. And this get-

105   Reciprocity and the News: The Role of Personal and Social Media Reciprocity in News Creation and Consumption, Avery E. Holton, Mark Coddington, Seth C. Lewis, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, International Journal of Communication, 2015, [accessed 3 December 2018].

ting information into the media, to journalists, is one side of social media usage to temper the hindered freedom of expression in these countries, and it has been extensively used.

Another side is using social media to get the information out to the public and breach censorship, political or economic controls. This potential of social media, which is still perceived as being out of the direct control of the authorities, is mostly incidental, a last resort and a way to counter direct censorship.

Due to their everyday workload and tasks in newsrooms, many journalists are producing media content that they are not ready to endorse and promote. In some cases, some journalists are "copy-pasting" or rephrasing work, and it follows that they are not proud of the content they are producing, thus they do not share it on social networks, platforms that they see as spaces where people endorse evidence of their professional success. Some journalists said that their readers send them valuable information in messages on social networks and that this information has been valuable to some of their investigations.

[Regional focus group] – "Last year I was working for one television company and, honestly, what we made there had no value. I didn't share it because I didn't feel I could stand behind it."

[National focus group] – "The current configuration and structure of work is such that I have nothing to be especially proud of to publish on Facebook." – "One of the advantages of working freelance is that I rarely have an article I did not want to do."

Most of the journalists who work in newsrooms said they have no restrictions, no rules or strategic communications documents that they have to follow when it comes to their social media activities. Many journalists, especially those from the focus groups composed of journalists from the four countries of the region, see the task of promoting their work online as another burden. A few reported their company's request of maintaining Facebook, Instagram and Twitter activity as a pressure and said that it stands in the way of their work on stories. They claim that it is easier for those who have a media company to worry about that. However, a significant number of participants in both groups disagreed and suggested that, in such cases, media companies are not promoting the authors but are only highlighting the media company's brand.

Differences in the potential and usage of social networks in different countries affect the way they are used. Journalists recognise Twitter as 'the social network for journalists' and especially as the one where they can promote their work. However, the network is barely used in the region, so they realise they would not reach their local audience. Instead, a few use it only if and when they want to reach a wider European or global audience and present themselves to the media outside the region.

[International focus group] – "In Hungary, you can't really find a journalist who works on local affairs and has a Twitter account. So Twitter isn't important. If you are working for an international news desk or corporation, then you can find Hungarian journalists."

And in some countries, although it is accessible, social media is not recognised as being useful and the promotion of work is not recognised as being part of the job. Based on the focus group discussion with journalists from various backgrounds, ranging from the United States to Russia, we came to the conclusion that, although social media may be affordable, free of direct political control and in general use by the audience, impeded media freedom still largely affects journal-

ists' engagement in social media activities. This means that journalists' promotion of their work on social networks depends on the freedom of the media, too.

[International focus group] - "I can't speak for all of Russia. But for me, I don't use social media to promote my stories because I don't decide on that – I write the news and my agency does that part. There are some people in department of social media that are doing all this work. My work is to report carefully and currently. I don't take part in promoting anything."

On the opposite side of the media freedom spectrum, journalists notice another issue with hindered freedom of expression – algorithms and culturally created bubbles limiting the reach of social media activities. What they noticed is a lack of professional journalistic engagement on social networks with wider audiences, leading to lack of wholesome representation of society and consequently a limitation of the wider reach of information.

[International focus group] - "I came from the Washington Twitter bubble and I think that a lot of journalists do more harm to the profession... It's like inside jokes of people, like in some bar..."

In an attempt to challenge traditional media models of centralised newsrooms and to offer possible solutions to the censorship, political control and economic pressure exerted through the newsrooms' hierarchy, we asked focus groups and influencer-journalists to comment on the possibility of decentralisation, i.e. individual use of social media as a medium for publishing journalists' work.

A few journalists from our region of interest said that they use social networks in a similar manner, to publish reports on a specific topic of the migrant crisis. Those are the same ones who were knowledgeable on the crowdfunding opportunities for this type of journalism. The majority, however, suggested that they still need media outlets to exert influence and ensure sustainability. Interestingly, influencer-journalists share the same position, although they do emphasise mutual dependency, i.e. not only that journalists are dependent on media outlets, but that social media provided for a reversed order as well.

"Journalists without the media are just bloggers, and they will always be mutually dependent. After all, no matter how decentralised the media is, it will still profit from journalists' social media popularity." – Adis Nadarevic

"I want my articles wherever there is a huge circulation of people. If I were working alone, I would narrow down my audience. Sometimes on Index.hr people read my articles not knowing me. [...] I also think I would make it alone, but I still need a media outlet, a brand media." – Tomislav Klauski

A few of the influencer-journalists see media outlets still as ensuring respect for professional standards, such as representing all sides of a story and fact checking.

"I support everyone's wish to write a blog, start a YouTube channel, and use Instagram or any social network to spread their ideas. I just hope that among those people there are more of those who are responsible towards the public and who are careful what they publish and those who don't manipulate information." – Damira Kalac

Influencer-journalists see their social media brands as safety nets and back-up plans, as well as offering added value to their professional brand, contributing to their individuality and independence as authors. To confirm this argument, we have to highlight the case of Ivan Ivanovic,

the host of the infotainment TV show "An Evening with Ivan Ivanovic". He condemned the Serbian Government for the lack of freedom of expression in the country and announced that he was leaving Prva TV due to censorship. After his statement, the final episode of his show was cancelled and not broadcast on the TV channel, although it had been advertised and produced. As we outlined earlier, mostly due to the requests of media companies, some broadcast journalists are carefully developing their presence online, and so Ivanovic personally has a significant following on a number of social networks. He used those networks to disseminate the first statement on censorship in the country. After his show was banned, he disseminated it through his channels on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Finally, he announced that he was continuing a low-budget production of his show and would air it on his YouTube channel.

Within the realm of social media, journalists are more exposed to direct online harassment, threats and pressure, which further hinders freedom of expression. Many journalists have sufficient digital competences to be cautious. However, some of our interlocutors said that it is often a challenge to keep a balance between being active on social networks and to be safe from cyber-attacks.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Reasons why authors think that journalists should be social media influencers?
· *The number of social media users in the West Balkan (WB) region is growing.*
· *The number of users searching for news on social media is growing in the WB region.*
· *People consume news accidentally through social media.*
· *The media and journalists are lagging behind technological development and are only now starting to engage with social media.*
· *Misinformation thrives through social media due to a lack of quality information.*
· *To counter misinformation journalists must adapt to the social media landscapes and trends.*
· *Users, especially young people are turning to influencers to help them navigate the abundance of information.*

Why are journalists in the WB region reluctant to promote their work through social media?
· *Due to a lack of media literacy and awareness of the importance and opportunities offered by social media.*
· *Due to a lack of media freedom – the freedom to publish cannot make up for the lack of freedom to investigate and conduct basic journalist work.*
· *Due to the prevailing culture of collectivism – pertaining to a lack of willingness to stand out.*

The way forward:
· *Raise awareness of the necessity of meaningful and strategic social media engagement by journalists.*
· *Media outlets should encourage and financially support journalists' social media activities.*
· *Big technological companies should provide the tools and (financial) means to ease journalists' social media engagement.*
· *Journalists should be trained in promoting their work through social media with high sensitivity towards and respect for cultural differences.*

The new global crisis of trust in information[106] only adds up to a long-standing crisis in media freedom, trust in journalism and respect towards institutions in the transitional democracies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. Worldwide technological giants, such as social network platforms, governments, news media and academics, are trying to tackle the crisis in their own capacities, with their own motives and with unknown results. This study attempts to contribute to the discussion, focusing on a niche market and a particular opportunity – the use of social media by journalists in the Western Balkans.

Building on the conclusion of the LSE Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology[107], which recognises confusion, cynicism, fragmentation, irresponsibility and apathy as the five great evils of the information crisis, we think that journalists as professionals should take the responsibility of keeping up with technological changes. Following the limited body of literature on accidental news consumption through social media and the importance of opinion leaders in getting information[108], the authors of this study argue that journalists should build their own personal brands and act as social media influencers. In this study, we tested this argument against the opinions of various journalists in these four countries.

Journalists do not see themselves as promoters of their own work. As we have outlined in the study, the research data showed that there are three reasons for this: (1) a lack of digital competences; (2) the incongruence of the individualistic culture fostering the development of personalised behaviour on social networking sites with the cultures of the former communist countries in the Western Balkans and a questionable approach to journalists' ethics in relation to comments versus facts; and (3) a lack of freedom of expression and sustainable models of financing independent journalism.

As a way forward, we recognise the necessity to **initiate wider discussion on influencer-journalists**. Their basic responsibility and role as influencers would build on the current description of the profession – keeping the public informed and helping citizens make informed decisions, while at the same time using the potentials and user-oriented nature of social networks. It would also involve helping audiences navigate the saturated information environment.

"Journalists should:
- Connect – be accessible and present on all platforms
- Curate – help users to good content where ever it is
- Be relevant – use users' language and 'listen' creatively with data
- Be expert – add value, insight, experience and context
- Be truthful – fact checking, balance and accuracy
- Be human – show empathy and diversity and be constructive
- Transparency – show sources, be accountable and allow criticism"[109]

106   Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework For Media System Resilience, The Report Of The LSE Commission On Truth, Trust And Technology, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2018.
107   Ibid.
108   News in Social Media, Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders, 2018, (accessed 2 December 2018).
109   'Fake news': the best thing that's happened to journalism, Charlie Beckett, Polis, London School of Economics, 2018, (last seen December 4, 2018)

Professional journalists empowered to be influencers would personalise the news and increase its relevance, thus helping counter misinformation. Through reciprocal engagement with audiences, influencer-journalists would have an opportunity to **restore trust in journalism**, while at the same time ensuring access to freedom of expression. Social networks provide a medium for sharing information to a wide audience and the construction of a personal brand. This potential should be used **to empower journalists to counter, or at least curb, censorship.** Journalists who become their own brands, with the support and expectations of a significant number of users, would have a safety net of public individuals that would serve them against political and financial pressures. And we are currently seeing the proofs of this argument in one of the observed states – Serbia.

Since the lack of journalists' engagement with social media is not caused only by a lack of digital competences, tackling the issue has to reach much deeper. Journalists mostly look at influencer-journalists in a positive way, but they do not see themselves doing anything similar. **Changing the general culture that fosters collectivism** and the lack of leadership pose a challenge and a requirement for extensive and timely training, workshops and discussions.

Based on discussions and anecdotal evidence, we conclude that analysing the financial aspect is also important. And this argument is twofold. Firstly: social media provides freedom to publish content but does not substitute or complement traditional media, which provides a financial basis for news content production. In this regard, **giant technological companies which own social networks should provide incentives for increased journalist engagement** and content sharing through simplifying the access to content monetisation. **Scaling monetisation opportunities** for those producing newsworthy content on small language markets is a responsibility that big technological companies such as Facebook and YouTube must bear. And secondly: some media companies are aware of the importance of being present on social networks since it attracts readership and creates engagement and influence with the content they share and, although many media companies prefer their journalists to be active in sharing content, they still rarely invest in training journalists, considering this to be something they should know naturally. Furthermore, some journalists reported that the **financial incentives offered by media outlets to journalists for boosting their online presence** proved to be effective, thus should become more widespread practice.

This, however, does not mean that it is sufficient to increase the level of general audience media literacy, but would provide more accurate, professionally produced information in the social media realm, where misinformation currently thrives in its absence.

Future research should include a wider representative survey of journalists and focus on precisely defining concepts. Focusing on the audience side of the communication channel and their perception of trends regarding influencer-journalists would also be valuable.
Instead of offering extensive conclusions to the study, we find it more useful to share the examples, thoughts and advice of those journalists who are perceived as professionals pushing the boundaries and embracing the changes and trends that technological development is bringing.

- "Nobody [at CNN] is required to have social media, but it is encouraged. It is also very natural for most people. These are people who like telling stories, and this is another way to get people to pay attention to your story. [...] I think it's really a mistake to file a story and be done with it. You're never done with a story. Especially if it is a good story." – Emma Bordeaux-Lacey, editor at CNN, Washington D.C.

- "Once upon a time it was enough for you as a journalist to make a good story and go home. However, now you have to promote your story." – Nenad Pejic, editor-in-chief of Radio Free Europe, Prague, Czech Republic.

- "I think [that restoring trust] is found in having even more transparency, not just in the work itself, but doing a lot more, like meeting people where they are and not expecting them to come to you and explaining face-to-face what you're actually working on. [...] I would like our social media presence to be more open regarding what we have found, what we're trying to find. It is all about being upfront when you have the answers and when you don't. Being present on social networks can help reporters, in that people recognise them, that people know they can reach out to them." – Katie Sanders, editor at PolitiFact, St. Petersburg, Florida.

- "I think good content should be shared, content that people could learn from. [...] It sounds idealistic, but if people are exposed to something good for a long time, it changes them." – Slobodan Georgiev, editor at BIRN Serbia, Belgrade.

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