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PERCEPTION IS ALL THAT MATTERS: A STUDY OF MEDIA USE AND THE JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE ETHNIC DIVIDE IN NORTH MACEDONIAN AND WHY IT MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

How can media impact perceptions of state-building in the ethnically and linguistically diverse region of North Macedonia? Since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, North Macedonia has found itself at the intersection of cultural and territorial disputes involving neighboring countries including Serbia, Albania, Greece, and Bulgaria. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of North Macedonia creates a unique environment in which politics and ethnic identity collide with differing perspectives on its impact towards democratization. Journalism intersects media use by political actors and the public, creating a complex landscape where misinformation thrives and public trust in both media and government declines. These factors are further complicated by a global movement towards populism amid efforts to integrate into the European Union; a twenty-year effort which underscores the impact of ethnic and linguistic disputes on state building and democratization. While there has been considerable research done in other Balkan states, literature discussing journalism and nation forming in North Macedonia is scarce. Accordingly, research in this study specifically investigates the impact of journalism and media on the perspectives of citizens in North Macedonia and how those perspectives can shape the development of an ethnodiverse nation. A qualitative analysis was conducted on a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists, during which their views on state building and political divisions were discussed. Findings present the existence of differing perspectives among journalists on whether the ethnic divide is a substantive issue or rather a narrative used by political figures to shape public opinion.

Key words: media, journalism, ethnic identity, state-building, perceptions, moralization

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is in the middle of a crisis. Attacks on its credibility by populist political actors amidst the strong influence of oligarchs and a desire to remain relevant have complicated traditional roles. Though media has long served as the “conduit between the public and the news” (Singer & Brooking, 2019) it now faces new challenges with the rapid growth of technology and internet use. In North Macedonia, the interactions between media, government, and the public sector create a multifaceted dynamic influenced by ethnic identity and perceptions of an ethnic divide among the population. *Perception*, when approached as an ideology, is a political tool that can sway public opinion and has been used as such by savvy politicians. Measuring the impact of media, especially as it pertains to the increase in partisanship and selective news consumption habits, is a multi-pronged process which requires an understanding of a country’s political climate in concert with journalists’ own feelings of their role and how they interact with their audiences.

But why does perception and specifically journalistic perspectives matter? A person's belief system shapes their perception of facts and reality, leading to debates on whether a problem exists rather than how to solve it (Rutjens & Brandt, 2018). Polarization among the public sector, especially during elections, is an inevitable result of social interactions and discourse. Group opinions and the desire for acceptance among its members significantly influence an individual's media consumption habits, leading to increased polarization both in the public and within the media (Stroud, 2010). This pattern of social behavior is no less existent among the journalist and media corps, where the added ties of the profession help form a group identity. This study aims to ascertain if journalists, through decades of experience as political watchdogs and conveyors of truth, have cultivated a moral perspective on the responsibilities and ethics of journalism. Further, whether these moral attitudes prevent them from adapting to the norms of a digital and post-truth era and if, in their efforts to maintain relative objectivity in the interest of ethics, they instead perpetuate perceptions and narratives that are influenced by their own biases.

Relatedly, populist political actors have little difficulty in perpetuating an “us versus them” scenario in which journalism and news outlets can be denigrated and used to further a political agenda rather than as public tools for information gathering. In a functioning participatory democracy, media sources like television, print and online news sources can provide individuals with information that will shape their feelings of government efficacy. These factors play a part in how journalists see themselves and their roles, especially amid hostility and harassment by populists and their supporters.

Media sources and individual perspectives are particularly relevant in North Macedonia where the distance between political elites and the average working citizen is much shorter than in countries with larger populations. Moreover, each demographic tends to live in clusters surrounded by other individuals with the same ethnic background and language creating an environment that is “characterized by a highly polarized and fragmented society, particularly along ethnic and political lines” (Association of Journalists, 2023, 13). Fragmentation of ethnic groups with similarly divided news sources has led to diminishing trust not only in the media

and government but also in various other groups whose interests may differ from one's own. An added factor, especially in times marred by growing populism, is that when distrust in the news grows, people become more susceptible to disinformation. The impact of these conditions in North Macedonia is amplified by the population size relative to the number of media outlets available, especially during elections, when there is a dramatic increase in the number of internet portals (Treneska, et al., 2024, 14). Despite the considerable number of media options available, people tend to rely on a curated and truncated list of news sources that reinforce their own biases, a pattern which can result in “knowledge resistance” whereby individuals understand less in total (Strömbäck, 2022).

Country Context - Politics and Media

North Macedonia, with a population of 2.1 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025), shares its borders with Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. The country has a complex and ethnodiverse population, with ethnic Macedonians holding the numerical majority, followed by ethnic Albanians. Religion is similarly reflected with the primary religion of each group being Orthodox Christian and Muslim, respectively (Piacentini, 2020). However, language serves as the most distinguishing feature between the two groups because the two are not mutually intelligible. Further, primary and secondary education is segregated making language “not only the main ethnic marker between the two largest communities, but also a prime obstacle in bridging them” (Piacentini, 2020, 100-101).

North Macedonia has a unicameral parliamentary legislature under which a multiparty political system has been created with parties that serve specific demographics and ethnic interests (IPU Parline Global data on national parliaments, 2025). The “Your Macedonia” Coalition, led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) is currently in power and has 58 seats in parliament (IPU Parline Global data on national parliaments, 2025). The VLEN Coalition is made up of several smaller parties serving interests for the Albanian population and is notable in its efforts to undermine the longstanding influence of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) party which is currently the largest Albanian political party in North Macedonia (Treneska, et al., 2024, 16).

The media landscape in North Macedonia is equally complex and includes state-run, non-profit, and privately owned media. There are a total of 107 radio broadcasters operating within the audio and audiovisual market, including 44 television stations and 63 radio stations (Pepeljugoski et al., 2023). Additionally, several media outlets in North Macedonia, are either not-for-profit or are funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The regional Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), for example, is a network of non-governmental agencies, with the stated goal of providing investigative reporting to the Western Balkan region (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2025) whereas the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) states on its website that it serves as a non-profit organization which provides investigative news on corruption and organized crime (Investigative Reporting Lab, 2025). As in government and politics, North Macedonian media is also divided along ethnolinguistic lines. State-run television and news sources like MRT and Nova Makedonija are presented in Macedonian while Alsat television and KOHA Newspaper are primarily Albanian language outlets (BBC News Online, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between media, politics, and government involves various elements, including media consumption habits, political climates, and views on the role of media. Although there are a variety of other factors, this study focuses on the as a framework for predicting behavioral aspects that can help mitigate issues like the rise in populism and the spread of misinformation. Some research suggests that understanding journalistic impact is best done using a theoretical framework that either empirically explores the relationship between media and the public (Panievsky, A., et al. 2024) or uses inductive thematic analysis “informed by folk theories of journalism” to predict behaviors (Juarez Miro, C, 2023). Both approaches focus research on an interpretation of emergent themes that can explain the media-public interplay and its role in combating misinformation and distrust.

Media Consumption Habits

Personal media consumption habits which include access to news sources and media literacy, play an integral part in the public perception of government efficacy, affecting voting and democratic participation (Moffitt, 2016; Strömbäck, et al., 2022). These habits are influenced by how an individual consumes content which itself is impacted by generational biases towards a particular form of media. In North Macedonia, where the population includes multiple ethnic groups, these habits are further affected by the specific needs of ethnic identity adding a layer of complexity to an already dynamic political system.

Journalism and Media Systems – The Not-so-secret Weapon of Populism

Research on populist leaders’ use of media is another component in understanding journalism’s evolving role in the political sphere. The current political climate shows a global rise in populism that is aided by the digital age. In North Macedonia where political campaigns like the one that brought the current administration to power use phrases or slogans like “Your Macedonia” to appeal to nationalistic tendencies. While not as incendiary as past movements like the

While the definition of populism has seen many variations over the years, one modern perspective claims it should be seen as a “political style that is performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts” (Moffitt, 2016, 3). Moreover, viewing populism as an “ideology, strategy, discourse or political logic” (Moffitt, 2016, 5) can help provide a framework for studying how political actors interact with media. András Péthő, an investigative journalist for Direkt36, an independent media outlet in Hungary, wrote of his own experience with populist leader and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose efforts to silence media were successful and demonstrates why journalists have had little success in maintaining their own concepts of integrity and fair reporting against the backlash and harassment of powerful world leaders (Péthő, 2025). Orbán’s playbook uses familiar right-wing populist strategies that matter-of-factly vilify liberal progressives and claims victory at every turn (Mos & Pivezan, 2024, 335). These tactics employ emotional appeal and national identity to craft a perspective aligned with an ideological framework that is intended to sustain an ongoing effort. In other words, perception plays a significant role in the rise in populism. The establishment of elitism, whether real or imagined, is a component of populist rhetoric and is the basis for maintaining division among the populace.

Social Sorting

Any theoretical framework must also incorporate the study of social behavior and media consumption habits. Social behavior is key to how society functions and evolves. Understanding that “society is sown together by the complexity of its social division” (Mason, 2018, 18) provides insight into how perceptions impact decision-making in states with dynamic political systems which is especially true when politics and policy are influenced by perceptions of ethnic concerns. Journalists in North Macedonia, are representative of the population at large due to its own division along ethnic lines. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that social and identity sorting can occur within industry.

A key element to this type of sorting is moralization or the idea that moral attitudes affect social and political behavior (Rutjens & Brandt, 2018, 11). In this case, moralization can be seen as an element of the perspective of ethnic divide, either on the part of journalists or the public. Specifically, personal moralization may be at play with belief systems that are rooted in ethnic identity. Existing literature references the belief that the ethnic Albanian population in North Macedonia is marginalized, and such beliefs tend to be held by members of that demographic (Piacentini, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research in this topic focused on an inductive analysis of seventeen semi-structured interviews of journalists, editors, and reporters in North Macedonia. Interviews were conducted from September 2024 through March 2025 and included a set of pre-determined questions while allowing for discussions to evolve organically around the responses. All interviewees were asked for input and perspectives on three topics: 1) whether there was an obligation by journalists towards state-building; 2) whether the industry could or should be regulated; and 3) what hurdles the country faced in its efforts to form a strong democratic state. Other topics raised in conversation include corruption, misinformation, EU integration, populism, and oligarchy.

Each interview was conducted in English and had an average duration of one and a half hours. The collected data was first examined manually using investigative and critical inquiry methods (Saldaña, 2011, 20-21) followed by pattern construction and values coding (Saldaña, 2011, 90-105). Interviewers were then grouped along ethnic lines (i.e., worked for a news outlet that served a specific ethnic group or identified as a member of a specific ethnic group). Initial cycle of coding reflects that perceptions on the role of journalism in North Macedonia varied slightly but were consistent with long held beliefs on what journalism means and how it should function (Cox, 2021). A second cycle analysis of data further grouped themes based on responses to specific questions, one of which pertained to perceptions of primary obligation or role.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations of Study

Interviews were conducted using ethical research guidelines which include obtaining informed consent and ensuring that the purpose of the research was known to all participants. Although interviewees spoke on the record, unless otherwise indicated, anonymity was ensured and responses used solely for research purposes. All information and personal data were preserved, adhering to data protection regulations and confidentiality.

Further research would benefit from the addition of surveys from a larger dataset of journalists to enhance the study and allow for a quantitative component that can make these findings generalizable to regional and even global impact. Additionally, this study only touched on the impact of *moralization* in society and by extension, throughout journalists as a demographic. Further exploration of *personal moralization* (Rutjens & Brandt, 2018) as an element of social and identity sorting among journalists may yield added insights.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative analysis is appropriate given the comparatively small but representative number of journalists that were sampled in North Macedonia. A study of the data from the seventeen interviews yields insight into how interviewees define journalistic roles, producing a perception that is still consistent with traditional views (Cox, 2021). Although all interviews were on the record, confidentiality of the interviewees was maintained using “Anonymous” and the date of the interview. For dates on which more than one interview occurred, interviews were also assigned a letter designation to differentiate them from each other. This occurred only once because most interviews were conducted on different dates.

Journalist Self-perception

To explain the relevancy of journalistic perspectives, first it was necessary to understand the industry’s perception of their own roles. When asked to elaborate on the obligations of their profession, the discussion then revolved around specific terms like “values,” “ethics,” “truth,” and “gatekeepers.” Because these terms relate to the conventional responsibilities of journalists, we can see that the standards of journalistic ethics are still considered to be a vital component to journalism in North Macedonia. Data collection was done in cycles with emergent themes being assigned codes to group them. The following table reflects the themes and examples given from the interview data.

Table A – Themes related to how journalists viewed themselves and their profession.

THEMES	Journalistic Integrity (<i>values, ethics, truth, responsible journalism</i>)	Public Interest (<i>watchdog, anti-corruption, balanced information</i>)	Specific Agenda (definition of journalists' roles were more limiting and discussion focused on a singular aspect of journalism)
EXAMPLES	“We must stick to the values of democracy, no matter what.” (Anonymous A, November 20, 2024)	“In an era of globalization, our job is to protect the values citizens chose to build on.” (Anonymous B, November 20, 2024); “Obligations are primarily towards public interests.” (Anonymous, December 18, 2024)	“Media must rise above society and corruption must be exposed.” (Anonymous, February 18, 2025)

Specific quotes amidst thematic analysis of all notes taken during the interview, including subjective observations of the interviewee's demeanor, reflected that most of journalists interviewed had strong beliefs in traditional aspects of journalism. Although many of the terms used were initially grouped under multiple headings, the table above reflects patterns that emerged specifically as they pertain to self-perception of primary roles. Accordingly, terms like *gatekeeping*, which was used in one interview to describe ethical obligations towards journalism (Anonymous, October 9, 2024), was coded under “Journalistic Integrity” during second cycle analysis which applied values coding to groups based on the question asked in the interview. Terms typically used by journalists including, truth, values and principles, were referenced by a slight majority (N=8) who believed that their obligations towards the profession were to be ethical and objective in their search for truth whereas journalists (N=7) who described themselves as watchdogs believed that serving the public interest was the primary objective. Two interviews indicated a specific agenda relating to journalistic roles. They are noteworthy because they deviated from traditional views of journalism. One interview, for example claimed his focus was on “counter-speech” and said there was a need for the ability of journalists to “call each other out” (Anonymous, December 2, 2024).

The Ethnic Divide – Truth or Myth

Journalists in the country are divided over the notion that ethnic divide is a problem. Of the 17 interviews conducted, 6 journalists expressed belief that ethnic divide in North Macedonia was a problem.

Table B – Journalist views on whether ethnic divide is a problem.

THEMES	Ethnic divide is a problem	Ethnic divide is not a problem	Not sure or is not a priority
EXAMPLES	“When state was building, it wasn’t inclusive, either socially, or culturally.” (Anonymous, November 11, 2024); “We need to find the right multiethnic formula for democracy to work.” (Anonymous A, November 20, 2024)	“No.” (Anonymous, February 1, 2025); “There has been no ethnic divide since 2001.” (Anonymous, December 19, 2024)	“Political actors find it profitable to use ethnic divide.” (Anonymous, January 20, 2025)

While there is less consistency among journalists when it comes to whether ethnic divide in North Macedonia is a problem, the majority (N=6) believe ethnic divide is a key issue in democratization. There was greater discussion among these interviewees around language and perceptions of issues between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, the two largest ethnic groups in the country. When these responses were further grouped by ethnic identity or identification with an ethnic identity, the numbers showed that half of the journalists (N=3) were Albanian, themselves. It is worth noting that language was also named as a point of contention between the two groups with divisions around whether it was reasonable for citizens to also be required to learn the Albanian language given the requirement that Albanians must learn the Macedonian language. Each of the Albanian journalists noted that language was a concern with the three who believed it increased ethnic divide saying that the preferred language was English.

A small number of journalists (N=3) indicated that they do not believe ethnic divide is an issue. Although two of the interviewees said only that it did not exist one represented that “nation building is slavic” and should be considered as such. (Anonymous, December 2, 2024).

Despite discussions around ethnic divide and language, there were several journalists (N=5) who did not specifically say or indicate whether ethnic divide was an issue. One example discussed the need for a democratic state to address all demographics, no matter the identity, but did not articulate ethnic divide as a specific key issue (Anonymous B, November 20, 2024).

CONCLUSION

There is little debate as to whether analyzing the media-public relationship can yield insight into how best to mitigate the effects of political concerns. The spread of misinformation and populist movements are known to affect democratizing efforts and domestic and foreign policies. However, addressing political cleavages rely first on identifying that a problem exists. An individual is more likely to have the perspective that an issue exists if that belief serves the ideology to which they belong. With journalism in the country reflecting the same divisions

and conditions that exist in the general population, it is fair to assume that given its influence, journalistic perspectives are key to understanding public perspectives in North Macedonia.

Why does this matter? It matters because understanding the power of perception is crucial for creating an informed and media-literate public. Existing literature and research demonstrate that media and specifically journalism have a tremendous impact on perceptions of government, society and even policy. Even when populist leaders claim that the media is controlled by the elite and should not be trusted, they express this with sensationalism and emotional appeals using media platforms. Past global conflicts show that propaganda has often fueled populist power, leading to devastating results (Singer & Brooking, 2019).

Second, perceptions in North Macedonia matter because conditions like populism, corruption, and a fragmented society, are also present in other democratic states. From a policymaking perspective, these conditions can be measured and then generalized for other countries or regions. Moreover, in a state that is both geographically small and has a population of a little over 2 million, the effect of any framework can be seen in a relatively brief time, making North Macedonia ideal for testing models.

Lastly, there are cases where social sorting and resulting perspectives have been shown to undermine democracy. For example, the 2016 U.S. elections was the result of “decades of social sorting” and was brought on by “defensiveness, judgment, anger and a need to win” (Mason, 2018, 127). Currently, the political climate in the United States is also one of rising populism and anti-media sentiment, fueled by perceptions of elitism on the part of the media. This comparison is notable in that democratic ideals are difficult to sustain under these conditions, as was the case in Hungary. Therefore, in a rising democracy, the lesson learned is that policy must be inclusive, irrespective of ethnicity or language.

Whatever the perspective, what is clear is that North Macedonia as a state is fighting for an identity that is as strong and as geopolitically relevant as that of any other state in the Western Balkans. This sentiment drives the push for strong nationalism in a country fragmented by ethnic identity.

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