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Media Manipulation of Religious Topics – Shaping Public Opinion through Censorship and Disinformation

Medijska manipulacija vjerskim temama – oblikovanje javnoga mnijenja cenzuriranjem i dezinformiranjem

Summary: The development of online media has opened up numerous opportunities for media manipulation and unlimited media space for deliberate distortion of information about the Catholic Church, fostering religious intolerance, and discriminating against religious groups through manipulative presentation of religious topics in Croatian media. To contribute to preserving freedom of thought and religion and to protecting objective public information from manipulation, Croatian Catholic Radio, in collaboration with the Croatian Catholic University and the Croatian Catholic Journalists' Society, launched the project »Voice of Truth – Vox Veritatis,« wherein a dedicated newsroom verified the accuracy and validity of statements, news, and publications related to the life of the Catholic Church in Croatia and globally. The results of this research are published for the first time in this article, aiming to encourage the creation of higher-quality and more credible journalism in the field of religious reporting.

Keywords: religious topics; online media; manipulation; disinformation; Voice of Truth; ethics; censorship.

Sažetak: Razvojem mrežnih medija otvorile su se brojne mogućnosti medijskih manipulacija i neograničen medijski prostor za namjerno iskrivljavanje informacija o Katoličkoj Crkvi, poticanje vjerske netrpeljivosti i diskriminaciju vjerskih skupina manipulativnim predstavljanjem vjerskih tema u hrvatskim medijima. Kako bi dao doprinos očuvanju slobode misli i vjeroispovijesti te zaštitu objektivnoga informiranja javnosti od manipulacija, Hrvatski katolički radio u suradnji s Hrvatskim katoličkim sveučilištem i Hrvatskim društvom katoličkih novinara pokrenuo je projekt *Glas istine – Vox Veritatis* u kojem se zasebna novinarska redakcija bavila provjerom točnosti i utemeljenosti izjava, vijesti i objava vezanih za život Katoličke Crkve u Hrvatskoj i svijetu, čiji se rezultati istraživanja prvi put objavljuju u ovom članku. Cilj je potaknuti stvaranje kvalitetnijega i vjerodostojnijega novinarstva u području vjerskoga izvještavanja.

Gljučne riječi: vjerske teme; mrežni mediji; manipulacija; dezinformacija; glas istine; etika; cenzura.

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I. The Principle of Truth

In combating media manipulation aimed at shaping public perception, filtering and distorting information and events, an individual's main tool is knowledge. As early as 2018, the European Commission redefined the concept of media literacy to reduce media seduction by disinformation, the production of fake news, and the spread of hate speech. Strengthening critical thinking and expression seeks to develop in individuals the ability to objectively, analytically, and logically assess information, ideas, and arguments and to distinguish fact from opinion and objective data from subjective perspectives. Furthermore, it aims to develop critical thinking to enable individuals to independently evaluate the credibility of information sources, form opinions based on evidence, rather than emotions or social pressures, and make informed decisions by connecting information from various sources. However, with the accelerated development of new technologies, the emergence of online media, and changes in media habits, the reliability and objectivity of truth have significantly diminished. In the general corrosion of professional journalism, the truth, which should be the heart of every news piece, has faced a crisis because reduced truth, half-truths, or untruths are increasingly exploited for various interests, often personal ones.

Explaining the journalistic profession and media relations, a group of authors (Verčić et al.) warn that journalism thrives on »soft information,« rumors, insinuations, and gossip, often originating from competitors or adversaries, and that the trust relationship between journalists and media relations personnel is undermined by lying. They reveal that in public relations, there are »three types of lies – black, gray, and white.« (Verčić et al. 165) A black lie is easily recognized when public relations personnel deny an event, refuting its occurrence to hide news or prevent a crisis. A gray lie is designed to embellish facts or omit crucial parts of events, without which the news is incomplete and lacks clear context. Meanwhile, a white lie serves to create a positive public image based on self-praise while avoiding journalistic scrutiny.

Studying ethical and moral dilemmas about the meaning of truth and objectivity within the mass communication system, Sivrić recalls the perspective of Greek philosopher Plato, »who believed, in the context of protecting fundamental human principles, matters of life and death, that lying is sometimes a justified tool for use and protection.« (Sivrić 87) Other moral relativists (MacNair, Nietzsche), judging the values of truth and the concept of absolute truth, argue that individuals should have certain knowledge and skills to be included in public communication systems.

On the occasion of the 52nd World Communications Day, Pope Francis called on journalists to be guardians of truth and journalism of peace, warning that the tragedy of disinformation and discrediting others by portraying them as enemies could lead to their demonization and the incitement of conflict. »Fake news is a sign of intolerant and overly sensitive attitudes and leads only to the spread of arrogance and hatred,« (*Poruka pape Franje za 52. svjetski dan sredstava društvene komuni-*

kacije) said the Holy Father, emphasizing that disinformation is rooted in a thirst for power, progressing from lie to lie to deprive us of inner freedom.

Exploring the reasons for manipulation from a spiritual-religious perspective, psychology professor Bošnjaković warns that individuals are willing to accept certain compromises, blackmail, and abuse to fulfill one of the fundamental human needs – belonging to a particular community. »Manipulating or exploiting others for personal purposes is a form of abuse. To manipulate means convincing others to think, feel, and act as we expect, and if they do not comply, they are belittled, blamed, shamed, and made to feel guilty. This way, the person is deprived of the ability to think, deliberate, and have freedom of choice,« (Bošnjaković 3). Behind all this, according to Marić Tokić, lies a deliberate disinformation strategy where the media, »through the dissemination of various forms of information, from disinformation, fake news, and incorrect information, influence the rational and emotional parts of the public, leading to changes in opinions and attitudes.« (Marić Tokić and Skoko 87). Bošnjaković further notes that managing fear is an abuse of power for various reasons. Often, individuals materially depend on superiors, and out of fear for their livelihood, they cannot resist. »One of the greatest fears in our lives is isolation because an isolated person cannot live well, sometimes not even survive. Public shaming, humiliation, and belittling also leave very negative consequences on personal growth and emotional and mental health.« (Bošnjaković 6) In view of the foregoing, the principle of truth in media must serve to protect individuals from manipulation and the abuse of power, particularly when communication is rooted in fear. Truth, as an ethical cornerstone, must not become a tool of isolation, but rather a bridge toward understanding and freedom.

2. Types of Inaccurate Content

Journalism is a profession where journalists should seek the truth by gathering information and correctly contextualizing collected facts to understand the context of news, reports, or the entirety of an event or topic. Since audiences differ in age, level of education, and interests—meaning different people have varying value judgments, viewpoints, and formed opinions—the understanding of truth, selection of information, and facts can be seen from multiple perspectives. When manipulating the masses, creators of fake news, leveraging emotions and troll practices¹, aim to achieve two primary motives: financial gain through clickbait² headlines that attract a larger number of Google advertisers to a specific website via social networks or ideological purposes, typically tied to political or market activism. The popularity of

¹ Troll - computing slang - a person in virtual spaces (internet groups, forums, blogs) who deliberately posts inflammatory, mocking, and offensive messages to disrupt discussions in order to achieve certain interests. Unlike an Engl. hater, who aims to harm an individual, trolls aim to disrupt the flow of discussions, ignite conflict, and draw as many people as possible into the process of media communication.

² The term clickbait refers to a link designed to entice users to click on it – typically involving sensational headlines or parts of texts leading to online materials of questionable value.

social networks, their accessibility, low costs, ease of use, and the potential for paid activism to maximize readership reach make them an ideal tool for political movements for swift communication. Social networks have proven to be a simple channel for disseminating inaccurate content. Given the hyperproduction of classifications, we can categorize them into three terms:

- Fake news – deliberately created and untrue, false news.
- False news – viral news with misleading content, based on journalistic errors where the intent was not to deceive the audience.
- News satire – parody, humor through which authors distort facts on significant topics to highlight negative social phenomena and act as a corrective. Satire is based on accurate information that is exaggerated, reversed, or highlighted to point out deceptions (Kulić 10).

Inaccurate content differs from propaganda in that it does not necessarily need to have political content, but indirectly influences the perception of individuals, institutions, or phenomena. If we determine that fake news is not necessarily only fabricated and inaccurate information from anonymous sources and can be created by influential media with the involvement of journalists, then we should categorize fake news as:

- Photo manipulation – using photographs in a fabricated context.
- Advertisements and promotional content – press releases from public relations departments presented as news.
- Propaganda – uncritical or inaccurate news glorifying policies or value judgments.

In 2021, the European Commission defined disinformation as intentionally produced and media-placed false, misleading, and fabricated information about events that never happened or statements that were never made, aiming for economic gain or deliberate public deception. Disinformation is differentiated from misinformation, which is released without the intent to deceive the public, and malinformation, which presents accurate information in a harmful or malicious manner (Wardle et al. 16-17). All three types of disinformation methods are classified as information disorders, consisting of:

- Fabricated content – entirely inaccurate content created to deceive and cause harm.
- Misleading content – misleading use of information to portray an individual or issue in a specific »framed« way.
- False connections – when headlines, visuals, or descriptions do not match the content itself.
- False context – when accurate content is shared on social networks in a false context.

- Manipulative content – when information and visuals are manipulated to deceive.
- Satire or parody – content not created to cause harm but with the potential to mislead users.
- Impersonation of legitimate sources – adopting the identity of credible sources (Wardle et al. 16-17).

Disinformation has a significant impact on media users, as it affects emotions and evokes strong reactions, often omitting the context in which the media content was created. This can lead to misinterpretation of information, manipulation of audio and visual content by adding false meanings and interpretations to achieve the desired influence. It often presents only one side of a story, attacking opponents without providing a complete picture of the situation. Traditional media are more credible but have a dwindling audience, making false information spread much faster via social networks. The most common methods for verifying disinformation on social networks involve using search engines, comparing the same topic across different sources, and finding and verifying information with experts.

3. The Crisis of Journalistic Ethics

The disregard for professional journalistic standards is the source of the identity crisis in modern journalism and journalists as subjects, as their role is taken over by capital owners, political authorities, and public relations agencies. In such circumstances, the journalist's main tool—the question—disappears. When a journalist is not a subject and does not ask journalistic questions, there are no answers or accountability, and ethics fall into crisis.

Addressing the crisis of journalism as a crisis of ethics, Poler Kovačić states that the journalist, as a journalistic subject, is the bearer of decisions and actions, »initiating and leading communicative actions, having control and influence, consciously directing their activities, and attempting to fulfill their professional roles assigned to them due to their professional competence.« (Polter Kovačić 25) However, in practice, due to market-oriented journalism, it can be determined that the journalist as a subject withdraws. »Their role is taken over by capital owners and holders of political power and authority. Instead of journalists, they control the communication process: actively delivering 'events' to mass media, selecting those that (according to their criteria) are suitable for publication, choosing 'facts' about them, creating pseudo-events, preparing 'journalistic' texts, etc.« (Polter Kovačić 30)

3.1. Journalists and Editorial Policy

Research conducted by Klauški during 2021 and 2022 on a sample of 21 political journalists from five national daily newspapers, titled »Do Croatian Journalists Fit into the Editorial Policy of the Newspapers They Work For,« highlights, among other

things, the economic constraints on journalists' freedom. The research was anonymous to ensure respondents' freedom in their answers, and in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists from five daily newspapers—Jutarnji List, Večernji List, Novi List, Slobodna Dalmacija, and 24 Sata. Among other things, it analyzed whether journalists adapt to or defy the editorial policy of the newspapers they work for. Every third political journalist admitted that editorial policy affects their work, and as an obstacle, respondents »emphasize that the editorial policy of newspapers is 'more influenced by advertisers than ideology,' which means that journalists in their work do not face ideological pressures as much as commercial interests of advertisers or sponsors, and of course, the current government.« (Klauški 5)

As these daily newspapers also dominate the online portal market, editorial policy should be responsible to its audience and not just subject to politics and interest groups. Journalists in this research warn that »the ideological orientation of newspapers sometimes defies common sense« and that their work is limited by the choice of topics or »editorial decisions on which interlocutors they want in which topic.« (Klauški 6) They also point out that ideological orientation affects the status of journalists in the newsroom, exposing them to financial and other degradations if they do not fit into the expected editorial framework. The dissatisfaction of political journalists is also evident from the fact that 86% of them responded that they notice political bias towards parties, authorities, and advertisers, while 76% state that they have a problem with it. »Apart from editorial, journalistic bias does not exist until direct censorship occurs.« (Klauški 6)

3.2. Media Control

Censorship is the process of monitoring and restricting freedom of expression and media reporting to control and prevent harm to political, economic, or cultural interests. »Its goal is to prevent the publication of opinions and information contrary to the interests of the state, ruling elites, and power centers. Censorship always reflects the political state of the country and the authorities' assessment of the threat to their interests.« (Leksikon radija i televizije 66) Censorship can be:

- Preventive, conducted before the public release of content.
- Suspensive, conducted after publication by withdrawing or deleting content and subjecting authors, editors, or media owners to repression.

The origins of censorship are always interest and profit, as Modrić specifies, listing 20 methods of censorship applied in Croatian media. He explains in detail how »for financial interests, publishers favor powerful advertising companies; bribed with various concessions and services, they favor politicians; due to various business calculations, they will favor anyone. The media are big business, where, in these regions, anything that might hinder greater profit is swiftly removed.« (Modrić)

Media control through censorship is carried out using various methods, depending on the context, means of communication, and goals of those implementing it.

Besides blocking information dissemination, filtering content, or restricting access to information, journalists, media houses, or individuals presenting unfavorable information may face penalties, sanctions, intimidation, blackmail, retaliation, and defamation. Ultimately, due to pressure from interest groups, certain articles, news, or content are retroactively removed from the public domain.

Psychologists such as George Gerbner and Arash Javanbakht consider fear manipulation one of the most insidious techniques of manipulation because it relies on managing human emotions. Journalists are often intimidated through various subtle blackmail methods or direct threats, endangering their livelihood or even their lives, to prevent them from performing their professional duties. In an atmosphere of fear, tension and stress levels rise as journalists are labeled as »suspect individuals« in order to limit their areas of interest and achieve the desired goal. In newsrooms where censorship is enforced, unconditional obedience to the censor is required, and those who oppose it are isolated, often by being transferred to another newsroom or a position where they will cause less »damage.« Modrić warns that disobedient journalists »gradually receive fewer serious assignments and are pushed into lower-ranking jobs, entertainment, or regional editions. This sends a 'pedagogical' message to the entire newsroom about what behavior will be punished and what will be rewarded.« (Modrić)

3.3. Journalistic Freedoms and Existence

Blackmail is a particularly insidious method of pressure on editorial boards or individual journalists, especially pronounced in local communities where the survival of media depends on a limited number of advertisers, often the goodwill of local politicians and managers. It is defined as a criminal offense »committed by someone who threatens to reveal something that could harm another's honor or reputation (or the honor and reputation of someone close to them) to force them to do something to the detriment of their or another's property, for the financial benefit of the perpetrator. It differs from extortion in that it does not involve force or serious threats of force.« (Hrvatska enciklopedija)

The survival of local media depends on public funds, and the system in Croatia is such that »the obligation to co-finance local media is used by many political authorities to blackmail local media.« (Sever) Very powerful companies, cities or municipalities stop advertising in media that report on them negatively or, in their opinion, not objectively enough. In this way, they narrow the space for the publication of authentic research topics and indirectly shape the media narrative, which is confirmed by the Media Freedom Rapid Response report on the state of journalism in Croatia, which warns of the lack of transparent criteria for allocating state funds to the media and the systematic favoring of »eligible« newsrooms.

Malović explains that media owners today value a good advertisement more than a good research topic, revealing how journalists are changing the policy of not

resenting advertisers with the so-called no-frills policy. »The less a journalist knows, the less he knows about professional skills, the lower his professional level, the more exposed to pressure and the harder it will be to resist it. A journalist with enviable professional knowledge will not succumb to pressure and will know what to do. This statement especially applies to young journalists, who, without sufficient knowledge, experience and support, remain at the mercy of media owners and controllers, who demand that the media become advocates of certain ideas, promoters of certain centers of power and promoters of various directives.« (Malović)

As stated in the document of the Ministry of Culture and Media »Analysis of the Media Sector in the Republic of Croatia«, there are no comprehensive, systematized and updated data on the education of journalists in Croatia because »neither science nor the profession has yet set a standard for its classification.« A higher-education requirement in journalism is not prescribed. In addition, there is less and less specialized, sectoral journalism because multimedia literacy is valued more than a brave, quality and educated journalist. »A weak profession is easier to manipulate, especially if there is a large share of those who do not have a higher education.« (Kanižaj and Skoko)

The connection between media and top officials is very dangerous. At a thematic session of the National Council for Monitoring the Implementation of the Anti-Corruption Strategy, »Media Freedom and the Fight Against Corruption,« held in the Croatian Parliament in 2009, former award-winning investigative journalist Hrvoje Appelt testified about the constant exposure of journalists to threats and pressures, often coming from the highest political positions in the country, in collusion with media owners and their editors. »It is a daily practice for ministers in the government and senior judicial officials to communicate with representatives of publishers, i.e., members of the management board. Their wishes are then passed on to editors, and editors pass them on to journalists.« (Appelt)

The result of such pressures is the practice of editors inserting new text into articles, completely changing the meaning of the originally written text. Appelt, whose investigative stories about corruption made headlines in all media and led to the arrests of key figures, also testified about a specific example of an editor who published affirmative articles about a politician friend under a pseudonym to rehabilitate him. »Media owners show that they are not at all interested in investigative journalism. Everything sold under the label of investigative journalism is often very delegated journalism, which is why true investigative journalists in Croatia can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Moreover, if you don't have a good contract as an investigative journalist, ensuring good working conditions, there is little chance that someone in Croatia will do what I did.« (Appelt)

In general, journalists in commercial media, forced to earn a living, are often subjected to mobbing, insults, and belittlement. A climate is created in newsrooms where everyone is replaceable, allowing editors to successfully implement their or their owners' ideas. Božidar Novak, a chronicler of Croatian journalism, writing in

the mid-20th century about the erosion of the profession and journalism as a calling, warned that there are no clear criteria for entering the profession or for advancement within journalistic newsrooms. »Journalists were required to be active participants in progress, not just passive recorders of events, and journalism was considered a very complex and responsible profession requiring much ability, education, and work.« (Novak 57-58) Novak states that editorial offices think exclusively in terms of profit and profitability, which influence editorial policy, and warns of internal tensions within the journalism profession. »There is tension between those who fight for the autonomy and freedom of the profession and those who submit to necessity. And for the profession to take a decisive stand in defense of its rights, it is also important to know how much the connection between the new generations of journalists and established journalists, primarily editors, has been lost.« (Novak 202) Also, he warns that due to the excessive approach and influence of marketing organizations on the editorial policies of certain media, investigative journalism disappears, journalistic correspondents, specialized journalists are abolished, all media become the same, lose their identity and their physiognomy because corporate sources of information begin to dominate. »The essence of editorial policy is increasingly the production of citizens into consumers and passive observers of what the powerful do in their name.« (...) »It should be especially noted that under the pressure of the technological revolution, the sharpness of journalism has softened a lot. The information that the citizen needs to know is at risk.« (Novak 200)

In order to avoid political orders and revenge from superiors, journalists and editors practice self-censorship, and Tomić and Kovačić adapt their statements to the editorial policy of the show, the signature style of a particular editor, and the instructions they receive from them. »In these conditions, journalists sacrifice an impartial approach to their work assignment and instead of investigative journalism, they are subjected to investigative journalism. Editors sit on committees, are often in a position to propose or demand greater and better material rights for journalists, so self-censorship is one of the ways of survival, but also of career advancement.« (Tomić, Kovačić 204) Competition among journalists, in addition to the level of material rights, is most often manifested in the attitude and assessment of the editor to whom the journalist will be entrusted with the most complex tasks, highlight texts on the front pages of portals or daily newspapers, enable columns or reporting in the first minutes of Dnevnik. An online survey in Croatian media conducted by Ivanuš in 2018 on a sample of 141 journalists and editors (a total of 11.1% of respondents out of 1,265 inquiries sent) showed the worrying data that 41.8% of the journalists surveyed were asked by their editors to disregard the Code of Honor of Croatian Journalists, and that a third of the journalists who were asked to do so acted on the editorial request. »Almost half of those who rejected the editor's request, the survey results show, suffered consequences for this action, with some of them being punished with salary cuts, and one even being fired.« (Ivanuš 86) In addition to pressure from within the editorial office itself, journalists are also exposed to external influences. Today, journalists work much more than before, when only traditional media existed, there is less time for investiga-

tive topics, and working conditions are more difficult and salaries are lower. Research has confirmed that there is a connection between years of work in the media and knowledge of ethical standards, with journalists with 15 or more years of work experience being more professional than those with less work experience. The weakening of ethical standards of the profession in editorial offices is also confirmed by a 2015 study by the Ministry of Culture, which showed that journalists are facing increased pressure. »Censorship comes in many forms – from outright censorship of a written article that is never published, to banning certain names from being mentioned, or simply keeping quiet about certain topics so as not to anger a powerful politician or a major advertiser who is on good terms with the media owner.« (Ivanuš 87)

»Journalists and media are losing credibility, and freedom of expression has been turned into media abuse« (Labaš 172). Communication expert Labaš analyzed the reflections of Luka Brajnović, a professor and theorist of media, who argued that »a good journalist is one who maintains a critical stance toward themselves and their judgments.«

A journalist »must not become a spy or informant and must always honor their word. A journalist must commit to ensuring that their professional duty, as well as their personal life, reflect the dignity and position that they and their profession hold in society. In their journalistic work, they must respect and uphold the general moral norms applicable in every society.« (Labaš 178)

4. CAT – Critical Analysis of Disinformation on Religious Topics

As part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, in late 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Media and the Agency for Electronic Media of the Republic of Croatia issued a public call for grant applications. These funds support establishing a system for verifying the accuracy of information published in public domains, media, and social networks, as part of the measure »Establishment of Media Fact-Checking and Public Data Disclosure Systems.«

The general goal is to reduce the amount of disinformation and misinformation in the public sphere, media, and social networks, while improving journalism quality, strengthening journalists' credibility, and ensuring the reliability of media content. Media companies in many countries are caught in the centrifuge of interest groups and, due to the collapse of traditional business models, resort to sensationalism and other pressures in their struggle for clicks.

Long-term media focus on profitability has impoverished numerous newsrooms, leading to the dismissal of promising and specialized journalists, and a sharp decline in professional and ethical standards. With the growth of the disinformation and fake news industry, the public's right to information is increasingly threatened.

Audiences have lost faith in professional journalism, rejecting trust in media as they perceive it as part of the problem. On the other hand, journalism, as society's corrective force, is more critical than ever for ensuring transparency in public spending, combating corruption, and uncovering and fighting all forms of crime.

The establishment of a Fact-Checking System within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan has linked the scientific community, the civil sector, and the media, providing financial support in the fight against disinformation. The Agency for Electronic Media received 88 project applications in response to two public calls, selecting 21 fact-checking projects covering a wide range of topics, including medicine, climate change, gender equality, tourism, culture, energy, technology, computing, the Homeland War, and religious issues.

While presenting the central platform for verifying information *Točno Tako* (Exactly So), Minister of Culture and Media Obuljen Koržinek emphasized that combating disinformation represents one of the biggest challenges for democracy.

»Disinformation campaigns aim, among other things, to generate distrust in traditional sources of news and information and create the impression that no one can be trusted anymore. In such cases, the media become both part of the problem and victims of such an environment. Methods of manipulating content are increasingly sophisticated, posing a significant challenge for all of us.« (Agencija za elektroničke medije)

Fact-checking is not just a tool but a process through which media regulators aim to preserve truth and ensure that all decisions in daily life are based on real facts, not manipulation.

4.1 Editorial Unit »Voice of Truth – Vox Veritatis«

The project CAT – »Critical Analysis of Disinformation on Religious Topics« – for verifying disinformation in the religious space was entrusted to the Croatian Catholic University and its partners, Croatian Catholic Radio, and the Croatian Catholic Journalists' Association. The goal of the project was to analyze information on religious topics within the media space and to create tools for recognizing religious disinformation. Therefore, a special editorial unit »Voice of Truth – Vox Veritatis« was established at Croatian Catholic Radio, in which a dozen editors, journalists, and expert associates used the method of fact-checking to assess the accuracy and validity of statements, news, and publications related to the life of the Catholic Church in Croatia and the world in order to prevent the spread of disinformation in the public sphere, or miscontextualization or manipulation of statements by Catholic leaders. »Systematic fact-checking of religious topics had not previously existed in the Croatian media space.« (Informativna katolička agencija)

The researchers focused on topics of public interest to explain why certain publications were selected and investigated, and followed an investigative approach, or

fact-checking methodology, that allows for a transparent and objective analysis of claims, statements, or information. They based their fact-checking on these four steps:

- Fact identification – determining the claim and precisely defining what is being verified, understanding the context in which the claim appeared, identifying the source of information and setting a preliminary hypothesis about the accuracy of the claim that will be further verified.
- Source verification – in order to ensure the reliability of the verification results, it was determined whether the source was a legitimate and reliable person, organization or publication, including checking their reputation, history and credibility.
- Information verification – a range of tools and techniques including internet searches, reading and citing documents, investigative journalism, analysis of collected evidence, and consideration of the context of an event or topic were used to verify the accuracy of information.
- Using multiple sources – to confirm the accuracy of information, different sources were used that can provide different perspectives on the same topic or event, reducing the possibility of bias and increasing credibility.

For the implementation of the project, journalists and editors of Croatian Catholic Radio underwent a series of training sessions, where they learned methodologies and procedures for fact-checking, methods for finding credible sources of information, and techniques and tools for editing articles. Over 18 months, they assessed the accuracy of 68 publications according to predefined criteria, focusing on topics they were knowledgeable about, which pertained to the Catholic Church in Croatia and worldwide, covering areas such as canon law, theology, spirituality, pastoral work, Church organization, and operations.

The analysis of the texts involved collaboration with professors from Catholic faculties, priests with extensive pastoral experience, political scientists, sociologists, and journalists. They also utilized specialized and theological literature. The verified texts were published on the website hkm.hr within the specially created section »Voice of Truth« and on the partner platform »Exactly So.« Each article was assigned at least one of nine possible ratings, providing readers with a clear conclusion for each investigation. The terms used were:

- Inaccurate – when it was determined that a claim was false, as refuted by multiple reliable sources.
- True – when multiple reliable sources confirmed that the information was authentic and presented in the correct context.
- Lacking Context – when a statement contained an element of truth but could be misleading without additional information.
- Misleading – when it included accurate information (text, photo, or video) taken out of context or mixed with a false context.

- Unsubstantiated – when the reasoning leading the author to a conclusion was not supported by sufficient data, information, or facts, or when the author's arguments were unreliable or came from unverifiable sources.
- Unintentional Error – when the author made an error, publishing inaccurate or unverified data from another source without the intention to misinform.
- Clickbait – when the headline did not correspond to the actual article content and served merely to attract attention with a sensational title.
- Gray Area – when claims in the publication could not be definitively evaluated due to a lack of reliable data, credible expert opinions, or relevant arguments.
- False Publication – when the article contained false information, data, or claims, or when the content was created with the deliberate intent of misleading and deceiving the public. (Hrvatska katolička mreža)

To avoid conflicts of interest, Croatian Catholic Radio as an organization, along with its journalists and editors as fact-checkers, adhered to the principle of independence from any single key source of funding that could have specific political, economic, ideological, or other interests. Additionally, they were obligated to maintain transparency at multiple levels. The fact-checker was required to publish the structure of the editorial unit conducting fact-checking, list the fact-checkers, their scope of work and competencies, and include short biographies of project leaders and department heads on the website. They were also required to describe in detail the procedures used to uncover disinformation or select information for analysis and verification.

When correcting disinformation, the fact-checker was obliged to transparently list all sources used in the correction and base the correction on more than one source. They were required to highlight potential conflicts of interest in the sources if such conflicts could affect the accuracy of the evidence. Only information for which factual accuracy could be established was subject to fact-checking, while expressions of opinion and value judgments, which could not be verified, were excluded from the process.

4.2. Results of the Analysis and Discussion

Of the 71 texts checked, 47 articles had one accuracy rating, 20 had two accuracy ratings, and four articles had three accuracy ratings, for a total of 99 accuracy ratings.³

Total Number of Articles	71
Articles with One Accuracy Rating	47
Articles with Two Accuracy Ratings	20
Articles with Three Accuracy Ratings	4
Total Number of Ratings	99

³ Access to all articles and ratings: <https://hkm.hr/kategorije/glas-istine/provjera-dezinformacija-o-vjerskim-temama/>

Of all the reviewed articles, 25 were marked as inaccurate because their claims were refuted by multiple reliable sources. Two were false publications, 7 were unsubstantiated, 16 were misleading, 19 were clickbait because their headlines suggested content that was not present in the articles, 8 contained unintentional errors, 1 was categorized in the gray area, 13 articles were published without appropriate context, and only 8 articles were rated as true.

Rating Name	Number of Ratings
Inaccurate	25
True	8
Lacking Context	13
Misleading	16
Unsubstantiated	7
Unintentional Error	8
Clickbait	19
Gray Area	1
False Publication	2
Total Ratings	99

The media addressed ecclesiastical teaching in 19 publications (26.76%). In most cases, the texts contained distorted interpretations of canon law and Church doctrine, with the correct context omitted due to sensationalist writing. 21 texts (29.58%) covered issues such as sacraments, liturgy, and spirituality with a superficial understanding of theology, which led to incorrect, unfounded, or misleading conclusions on this topic in the context of sacred heritage and church history, stating incorrect facts. Examples include incorrect claims that Saint Donatus was officially proclaimed the patron saint of the city of Zadar⁴ or that the largest church mosaic in Croatia is located in the National Shrine of Saint Joseph in Karlovac⁵. The pontificates of two popes, St. John Paul II and Pope Francis, were the focus of 10 articles (14.08%) in which they were described as making decisions or actions that were either inaccurate or not entirely truthful. For instance, Pope John Paul II was falsely attributed as the author of a very popular spiritual song despite evidence showing no connection to its intellectual property.⁶ The media also covered bishops and the Croatian Bishops' Conference, and an analysis of eight texts showed that they were presented negatively in 11.27% of cases, especially in the context of socio-political topics when the media denounced them for conservatism and intolerance,

⁴ Zadar has four patron saints: St. Chrysogonus, St. Anastasia, St. Simon and St. Zoila.

⁵ The larger mosaic is in the Church of the Holy Family in Solin, whose surface area is 231 square meters.

⁶ In the public sphere, 20 years after the death of Pope John Paul II, the belief still circulates that he is the author of the popular spiritual song »Krist na žalu«

without providing complete statements or explanations of their positions. Seven publications (9.86%) attempted to revise the historical role of Blessed Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, focusing solely on interpretations of his role during World War II while ignoring historical facts and documents that highlighted his advocacy for the persecuted. In five publications about specific priests (7.04%), the focus was on their mistakes or alleged scandals, while positive examples of their pastoral work were overlooked. This research includes various forms of unethical reporting:

- Omission of key facts – Many articles conveyed partial information or omitted context that changes the meaning of the message.
- Sensationalism and headline distortion – In some cases, headlines were clickbait, written to attract attention, even though the article's content did not support such claims.
- Bias – Criticism of the Catholic Church was based on preconceived ideological positions of journalists or editorial boards, without allowing the other side to respond.
- Historical revisionism – Particularly noted in articles about Cardinal Stepinac, where documented historical sources were ignored.

When it is taken into account that out of 71 articles, only 8 of them (11.27%) are completely true, it can be concluded that the media has a big problem in reporting on religious topics, in this case about the Catholic Church. One of the main possible reasons is ideological bias and secularism. A significant number of mainstream media outlets in Western societies have a secular or even anti-clerical worldview, reflected in journalists' work that portrays the Church negatively to align with dominant societal narratives. Another possible reason is sensationalism.

Number of Articles:	71
Truthful:	11.27%
Inaccurate and Others:	88.73%

Conclusion

The CAT project – «Critical Analysis of Disinformation on Religious Topics» provided a systematic and empirically based analysis of media reporting on religious topics in Croatia, with a special emphasis on the Catholic Church. The results of the research indicate a worryingly low level of accuracy and professionalism in media reports: out of a total of 71 analyzed articles, only 8 (11.27%) were assessed as completely truthful, while the remaining 88.73% contained various forms of inaccuracy, manipulation, omitted context or sensationalism. The most common assessments were »inaccurate,« »clickbait,« and »misleading,« which indicates entrenched patterns of unethical journalism. The analysis showed that the media are prone to distorted portrayals of the Church's magisterium, sacraments, liturgy, the pontificate of

popes, the activities of bishops and the historical role of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac. In many cases, key facts were omitted, sensationalist headlines were used, and the ideological bias of journalists and editorial staff further undermined the objectivity of reporting. It is worrying that religious topics are covered without a fundamental understanding of theological concepts and canon law, leading to misinterpretations and the spread of disinformation among the public.

Media that position themselves as political and social actors see the Church as an obstacle to liberal and progressive agendas, and by censoring and engaging in cancel culture⁷, they seek to weaken its influence in society through distorted reporting. Part of a broader media pattern may certainly be deliberate manipulation and the spread of disinformation that consciously distorts statements by church authorities or publishes half-information in order to portray traditional values as outdated or repressive. The research showed that the media largely do not meet professional standards in reporting on religious topics and that journalists need to be educated so that religious topics are covered truthfully and professionally.

In conclusion, this research indicates that the media audience should be cautious when consuming news about the Catholic Church, i.e., they should be educated to think critically, seek out original information from church media or independent sources that understand the real state of affairs, are theologically educated and are not influenced by the market or ideology. The media profit from clicks or ratings, and scandals, controversies, and negative stories packaged in various types of disinformation attract more attention than positive news because producing negativity related to the Catholic Church is more appealing to the audience than balanced reporting on the positive actions and role of the Church in society in the areas of humanitarian and charitable work, education and science, preservation of culture and art, advocacy for peace and justice, protection of family and life, and care for the sick and vulnerable.

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⁷ The term used for cancel culture describes a form of ostracism where an individual, group, or community is excluded or removed from public life, effectively becoming persona non grata.

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