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COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM IN POLARIZED MEDIA AGENDAS: CASE STUDY OF THE PANDORA PAPERS IN SERBIA⁹⁰

Review Article

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Abstract

Collaborative journalism is a key aspect of investigative reporting, enabling in-depth research through teams of journalists across countries. It allows local journalists, often facing economic and political pressures, to conduct thorough investigations that would be difficult to manage independently. However, in a polarized media environment, collaborative journalism often reflects the agendas of both sides of the media divide. This paper examines how the Pandora Papers (2021) became part of Serbia's polarized media agendas, focusing on the exposure of Serbian officials' offshore business activities through KRIK's investigative network. The analysis compares the perception of these findings in two opposing media outlets (anti-government N1 and pro-government Informer) as well as the public broadcaster RTS, revealing how the findings were interpreted to align with ideological stances. The results indicate that the findings of investigative journalists were interpreted in ways that aligned with the ideological matrices of one or the other side of the media divide.

Keywords: collaborative journalism, investigative journalism, KRIK, media polarization, Pandora papers

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Introduction

Major journalistic stories, those that have sparked significant events and inspired films such as *All the President's Men*, *Spotlight*, or *Good Night, and Good Luck*, are part of journalistic outputs from large media editorial teams willing to support the investigative process, fund the work of investigative teams, maintain confidentiality, and ultimately—protect their journalists. However, in an era where we talk about the crisis of journalism, even its demise (McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Zelizer, 2009), editorial teams are increasingly reluctant to allocate funds for such investigative stories, and often find themselves trapped in media consortiums whose market ownership interests define the only measure of journalism. In this context, the growing phenomenon of polarized media environments (Kulić, 2021), the global rise of populism (Noury & Roland, 2020), and the general global crisis of trust in the media (Kohring, 2019) must also be considered. In a polarized media environment, it is commonly believed that critical journalistic texts, even when of public interest, are segments of a “commissioned” narrative and orchestrated attacks on representatives of the opposing political agenda (Kulić, 2021). Simultaneously, in the era of populism, journalists are perceived as political opponents (Vranić & Kulić, 2021), within the current context of post-truth, an era marked by misinformation in which belief often trumps understanding (Carlson & Farhall, 2018).

In recent years, major editorial stories have been successfully replaced by large inter-editorial investigations, known as networked cross-border investigative journalism or collaborative journalism. This form of journalism is traditionally defined as editorial collaboration between media organizations, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, universities, and other participants working together to create stories that would be impossible to investigate otherwise (Alfter, 2016). These stories, however, are the products of strong editorial teams and quality journalists, as well as the strength of the established network that, in some way, protects each media organization individually. Some of the most notable such stories have included the Panama Papers, the FinCEN Files, the Paradise Papers, the Cartel Project, and others (Mesquita & Lima Santos, 2021; Abraham, 2020; Sambrook, 2018).

This paper will examine the role of collaborative journalism in a media-polarized environment, using Serbia as a case study, where two journalistic and ideological poles are in an irreconcilable antagonism. The paper aims to answer the question: How do pro-government and critically oriented media in Serbia treat findings related to public office holders in the country, which were uncovered by journalists through international investigative consortia? The analysis is based on the case study of the Pandora Papers from 2021, particularly the documents released through the international consortium by the Serbian investigative team KRIK. The paper will analyze how these documents were reported in October 2021 by the pro-government tabloid *Informer*, the critically oriented television N1, and the public service broadcaster Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS). The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how these findings were used to reinforce media and political orientations and fulfill agendas on both sides of the media spectrum, as well as to examine how investigative journalists utilized the findings to support their own media agenda. This does not imply that these poles are equal—neither in terms of market reach, quality, nor position within Serbia’s media landscape—but they are irreconcilably at odds, even to the point of attempting to delegitimize the opposing media pole (Kulić, 2021). The paper will first theoretically discuss the concept of collaborative journalism, then explore how such journalism operates in media-polarized societies, serving as a litmus test for detecting ideological matrices. This relationship will be further contextualized through the media landscape of Serbia, offering a framework for the case study that is the subject of the analysis. The analysis will provide a snapshot of the reporting by *Informer*, N1, and RTS during the given timeframe, and will also incorporate an in-depth interview with RTS journalist Anica Telesković, who, in her coverage of this topic—attempting to present both sides—became a target of media polarization, and later, a media witch-hunt from both sides of the media and political spectrum.

Collaborative Journalism – Theoretical Framework

Collaborative journalism is not a new phenomenon, but in recent years it has taken a central role in the debate on how journalism drives societal

change at the local, regional, and global levels (Mesquita & Lima Santos, 2021). Authors Mesquita and Lima Santos have extensively studied collaborative journalism in Latin American countries, which are nationally diverse but share similarities in terms of media systems, making them suitable for analysis and the application of this type of journalism, which is significant for each country individually. They remind us that journalists have been collaborating for various reasons since the 19th century, but today in our seamlessly interconnected world “the alliances between different journalists were spurred on due to technological advances, which have facilitated the communication between them” (Mesquita & Lima Santos, 2021, p. 545)

Although collaborative journalism is not a new term, it is part of a broader array of “journalisms” that authors aim to either integrate into or separate from the traditional journalistic profession (Kulić, 2022). Historically, the first and most famous form of “collaboration” dates back to 1846, when five daily newspapers in New York joined forces to form the Associated Press (AP) agency, sharing the costs of covering the Mexican-American War (Hartstone, 2018). Collaboration is also a component in the definitions of civic and/or participatory journalism, depending on whether these terms are considered synonymous or distinct (Jevtić, 2017; Nip, 2006). However, collaborative journalism, as it is interpreted in this paper, does not refer to collaboration with citizens, but to collaboration among professional journalists.

This form of journalism is also rooted in Castells’ concept of the “network society”, particularly in the segment where its democratic potential is emphasized (Carlson & Farhall, 2018; Castells, 2013). Such journalism is particularly important when “ordinary” local journalism, due to its limitations, is insufficient or not possible. This means that stories uncovered by investigative journalists working together surpass the political and economic constraints imposed on local journalists. These constraints should not be confined solely to political pressures, in the sense that political pressures are the only factors that limit journalists from producing quality journalism or “true journalism”. Corporate pressures, which demand journalism in the interest of the company, are equally present, where the “public interest” is aligned with the interests of the owners.

A prime example of collaborative journalism, in terms of its scale, is the Panama Papers. This project brought together 400 journalists from around the world, who synchronized and secretly searched 11.5 million files detailing the activities of various individuals and companies, mostly through “tax havens.” The secrecy and information protection required in this project is not characteristic of journalists who seek to publish information first, but the close cooperation between journalists and editors on a global level, along with oversight to prevent any errors in the analysis, led to a new paradigm in which the Panama Papers created a global newsroom based on trust, rules, and the cooperation of several hundred journalists (Naskidashvili, 2017). The outcome of such journalism was “government investigations in more than 80 countries around the world and help recover \$1.2 billion in 22 countries”. (ICIJ, 2016).

Collaborative Journalism in a Polarized Environment

Collaborative journalism acts as a countermeasure to the state of media polarization that is visibly present in both Western European countries and the countries of the Western Balkans. Media polarization is a condition that represents the most manifest form of social and political polarization, where the media take sides in political blocs and, within those parameters, report and perceive both themselves and the public interest. Collaborative journalism in local practice is carried out by investigative centers and media that are, by nature, critically oriented, as they focus on investigating corruption, misuse of funds, malfeasance, and the abuse of political and social power. “Critically oriented media” is the broadest term that encompasses this type of watchdog journalism. However, “critically oriented” media, when journalists are selective and uncritical of all political process participants, is often an insufficient term, and “oppositional media” may sometimes be a more accurate description.

Regarding the case of Serbia, which is the subject of this analysis, the media market is strongly polarized (Krstić, 2024; Kulić, 2021), with significant influence from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party in a large portion of the media – through five national television stations and much of the daily press (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). The state’s influence is also visible through private TV channels on the state-owned cable operator Telekom,

as opposed to the critically oriented television stations of United Media Group (N1, Nova S) on the cable operator SBB. The latest media freedom index report placed Serbia at 98th place, noting that “although there is quality journalism in Serbia, awarded for its investigations into crime and corruption, it is caught between rampant fake news and propaganda” (RSF, 2024). In the years covered by the analysis in this paper, Serbia was ranked 93rd (in 2021, when the Pandora Papers revelations were made), and 56th (in 2016, linked to the Panama Papers revelations).

Analysis: The Pandora Papers and Their Media Representation

This analysis is based on a case study of the publication of the Pandora Papers in Serbian media from October 4th to 10th, 2021. The focus of the analysis is on the segment disseminated to the public by KRIK journalists (part of the international network of investigative journalists, ICIJ). Unlike the Panama Papers (2016), which were also published through the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, but allowed journalists worldwide to independently search and analyze data via the publicly accessible Panamanian business registry, in the case of the Pandora Papers, KRIK journalists performed editorial selection, and independent verification was not equally feasible. Specifically, investigative journalists presented to the public the names of several (initially two political figures, followed by one connected to politics) out of 14 Serbian citizens who own companies and operate through offshore companies. The most important figure for the public was Serbian Finance Minister Siniša Mali, followed by Socialist Party of Serbia official Novica Tončev, with Nikola Petrović, the then- director of Elektromreža Srbije, also mentioned, as he was close to the political elite.

The analysis focuses on articles published in the daily newspaper *Inform-er*, television segments aired on RTS (including news reports, voiceovers, and TV packages), and the media representation of the case in the central evening news program *Dnevnik* at 7 PM on N1 television. The daily *Inform-er* is taken as a representative of pro-government media and the ruling political party, providing strong support to the ruling party, announcing government actions, and promoting state and/or party positions. N1, a

cable TV station, is considered the most critical of the ruling majority (i.e., the Serbian Progressive Party). It is a station broadcasted on the SBB cable network, meaning its reach is somewhat limited, but it plays a significant role in mobilizing opposition-oriented public opinion and politicians. The public service broadcaster was observed in its basic role as a professional service to the citizens, which is the criterion by which its professionalism was measured. However, European analyses, monitoring reports, and expert evaluations indicate significant influence from the ruling party on the public broadcaster's operations (SSM, 2023).

In this case study, the author will first focus on the content, presence, and focus of the presentation of the Pandora Papers findings, after which these findings will be compared and contextualized.

Analysis of N1's Coverage of the Pandora Papers

On the first day after the release of the Pandora Papers, N1 did not place the topic at the center of its *Dnevnik* (evening news), but it is important to note that the number of COVID-19 cases had significantly increased, which was a dominant topic on that day. However, in the following days, the Pandora Papers gradually took the spotlight. On October 6th, the first block of *Dnevnik* (8 minutes, roughly a third of the program) covered COVID-19, followed by information about the trial of Andrej Vučić (the brother of President Aleksandar Vučić). Only as the third segment did they air two investigative reports from KRIK journalists, totaling 8 minutes. The first report focused on Finance Minister Siniša Mali, while the second one was about Nikola Petrović, the director of a state-owned company.

The tone of the first segment and the anchor's introduction emphasizes the lack of response in Serbia to the Pandora Papers revelations: "In many countries, this triggers investigations, but not in Serbia; the prosecutor's office is silent, and President Aleksandar Vučić dismisses it as 'ordinary political attacks.'" This segment is highly opinionated, and the reporting deviates from presenting straightforward facts. The television package starts by stating: "After the documents revealed that Finance Minister Mali indeed owned 24 apartments in Bulgaria, the Prosecutor's Office, relevant institutions, and the minister should have reacted. This would show that we live in a state with the rule of law," which is the introductory statement

in the first off-screen narration. The report features five interviewees, four of whom argue that the prosecutor's office should react (drawing examples from Serbia and Montenegro), while one quote from President Vučić, taken from TV Pink, dismisses the matter as “political attacks.”

However, despite the interview with a KRIK journalist, the report fails to provide specific details from the Pandora Papers.

In the second report, the journalists focus on Nikola Petrović, who, while serving as head of a state-owned company, owned an offshore company that he failed to report to the Anti-Corruption Agency—a breach of the law that could result in imprisonment. This segment also lacks factual precision and relies on analogies and conclusions that do not necessarily follow from the evidence. Instead of providing solid proof, the package highlights a supposed connection to other figures, which, according to the journalists, implies suspicion about the process.

On October 7th, N1 dedicated the central news to the Pandora Papers. The first report covered Novica Tončev, an official from the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), who was implicated in the new revelations from the Papers. The second segment returned to Finance Minister Siniša Mali. In the Tončev segment, the journalists interviewed him, and he denied the allegations, claiming that while he had opened an account associated with the offshore company, he had not conducted any business through it and, therefore, had not reported it to the Anti-Corruption Agency. The rest of the report discussed individuals connected to Tončev, but without a clear explanation for why his actions constituted a legal violation. However, the segment hinted at the “what’s behind the story” through a teaser for a special broadcast featuring an investigative journalist.

In the second segment, N1 shifted focus to the opposition, specifically a statement by Dragan Đilas, leader of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), who criticized the pro-government media for focusing on him despite his name not appearing in the Pandora Papers. N1 devoted considerable airtime to Đilas's statement, which, in line with the polarized media landscape, was largely directed at the N1 audience and did not provide a balanced representation for audiences following pro-government media like *Informer* or TV Pink.

On October 8th, when *Informer* began its coverage of the so-called “Veritas Papers,” N1 placed the Pandora Papers findings further down in its

agenda, after 7:30 minutes. The focus shifted to Prime Minister Ana Brnabić's refusal to hold Finance Minister Siniša Mali accountable, with Brnabić arguing that it was irrelevant what someone had accumulated before entering government service. The N1 reporter countered with facts, citing when Mali became a government official and his roles since then. The segment included analysis by Vuk Cvijić, a journalist-analyst specializing in crime and corruption, maintaining an analytical tone without jumping to conclusions. The rest of the broadcast briefly addressed the Pandora Papers through a case from Montenegro.

On October 9th and 10th, when *Informer* was intensively covering the "Veritas Papers," N1 shifted its focus away from the Pandora Papers. The central stories were instead about the Jovanjica case, where government and police officials were accused of involvement in organized crime. On October 10th, in a brief mention during a report about the Veritas Papers, the N1 broadcast noted that for Prime Minister Brnabić, "Veritas Papers from *Informer* are more important than the Pandora Papers, which involved 600 investigative journalists from around the world."

Overall, N1's coverage of the Pandora Papers was nuanced and focused on the revelations in a critical light, especially the involvement of high-ranking government officials. However, the network was also mindful of maintaining a balance by offering space for the opposition to respond. The coverage was more in-depth compared to other media outlets, offering investigative insights, but it was also selective in its approach, often contextualizing the revelations within the broader political landscape of Serbia.

Analysis of Informer Daily's Coverage of the Pandora Papers

On the first day following the release of the Pandora Papers, which highlighted that Finance Minister Siniša Mali owned 24 apartments in Bulgaria, *Informer* published a text directly denying the allegations. The tone of the article is evident in its front-page headline: "Vučić Has No Secret Accounts," with two subheadings: "That's Why They Recycle Old Lies About Siniša Mali" and "The Tycoon Ordered His People Back in May to Find Any Financial Scams They Could Link to the President, but After 5 Months, They Have Nothing." The article's main message is clear:

President Aleksandar Vučić, who is not mentioned in the Pandora Papers, does not possess any assets or companies in this context. The article also denies the allegations against Mali, while the burden of proof is shifted onto opposition leader Dragan Đilas, who is accused of instructing investigative journalists to publish the information. The tone of the article is opinionated, far beyond simple fact-based reporting. Journalists are called “Đilas’s ‘investigative’ journalists,” their articles labeled “old lies under the guise of Pandora Papers,” and their claims are dismissed as “reheated scandals.” The article also references an investigation by a Bulgarian prosecutor, claiming that Mali had submitted a report from a graphologist proving that the signature on Bulgarian documents was forged.

By October 8th, *Informer* shifted focus to Dragan Đilas. The headline on the front page reads: “Đilas Confessed: I Pay to Be Praised,” accompanied by unusually long subheadings: “SSP Leader Confirmed That Through His Company Multikom, He Loans Millions to Journalists, Politicians, and Analysts,” “‘Veritas Papers’ – *Informer* Will Publish Tomorrow Who, How, and How Much Dragan Đilas Pays,” “How the Tycoon Loaned 201,504,000 Dinars to Those Who Pretend to Be Independent Analysts, Politicians, and Journalists,” and “How He Directly Finances Hate Media.” The article’s focus is on how the opposition leader finances media outlets to publish information that could benefit him politically. The investigative approach is based on a question posed by an *Informer* journalist at a press conference regarding whether Đilas’s company, Multikom, had loaned 201,540,000 dinars to his close associates and independent journalists. Đilas responded by stating: “I would need to look at the exact figures. Multikom has loaned money to many, and as far as I know, it always gets paid back.” The *Informer* journalist then added that the newspaper could only have obtained these figures “illegally” from the Tax Administration. The focus of the article moves away from the Pandora Papers, instead centering on Đilas’s alleged media financing activities, with Đilas presented in an extremely negative light. The ruling party is not mentioned in the text at all.

In the following issue (October 9–10), *Informer* dedicates significant space to discussing who and how much Dragan Đilas’s company, Multikom, has paid to various individuals. The article claims these are “fake loans,” as money has only been repaid in one instance, concluding that “obviously, Đilas uses these loans to control the media-political space in the country.”

Without delving into the accuracy of the information or the journalists' right to investigate money flows and media financing—both from the government and opposition—*Informer* employs a familiar tabloid tactic: linking any critical media coverage to opposition or foreign instructions. This tactic shifts the focus away from the factual subject of the Pandora Papers to a different narrative that may not be false but certainly diverts attention from the main issue. This practice has been used in many other situations to frame the narrative in a way that aligns with the government's interests.

Analysis of RTS's Coverage of Pandora Papers

On October 4, in the evening news segment (Dnevnik 3), RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) briefly mentions the Pandora Papers, framing the issue as a global scandal affecting high-profile figures worldwide, including Serbian officials. The news anchor introduces the story by highlighting the names of global figures such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the King of Jordan, and pop star Shakira, and then proceeds to mention Serbia.

The broadcast does not delve deeply into the issue, but simply reports that the Pandora Papers reveal that Finance Minister Siniša Mali allegedly owned 24 luxury apartments on the Bulgarian coast. Mali has repeatedly denied these claims, asserting that he owns only one apartment in Bulgaria. The report also mentions Nikola Petrović, former director of Serbia's state-owned Electric Power Company (Elektromreža Srbije), as a person connected to the papers. However, RTS avoids a more detailed discussion of these revelations, opting instead to place the Serbian officials within the broader context of the international figures involved, thus not addressing the matter in any depth.

On October 6, RTS briefly revisits the topic of the Pandora Papers in the context of the National Assembly's session. The news anchor notes that Minister Mali explained a set of financial laws, and while answering questions outside the chamber, addressed the Pandora Papers allegations. The segment includes a brief statement from Mali denying the claims made by the KRIK investigative network, which reported that Mali owned 24 apartments in Bulgaria. Mali responded, saying: "I would ask those

discussing this topic to stop lying, because what they are doing doesn't make any sense... I have one apartment that I duly reported, and for ten years I have been going there with my children for vacation.”

Despite presenting the allegations, RTS does not engage deeply with the topic or offer a more in-depth investigation into the claims involving high-ranking Serbian officials. In the days following the initial coverage, the Pandora Papers were not mentioned in the central news programs. The only program where the issue received more extensive treatment was the show *Oko Magazin* (aired on RTS1 at 18:20), where a segment of 17 minutes explored the topic further.

The focus of the *Oko magazin* was on the selective publication of names, rather than following the example of WikiLeaks, which made all available data public. In this regard, the question arose as to why only three individuals from Serbia were publicly named in connection with the Pandora Papers, while fourteen individuals were reportedly implicated. This was explained by KRIK editor Stevan Dojčinović, who stated: ‘We are journalists, WikiLeaks is not, we must be cautious with the data.’ Simultaneously, Dojčinović emphasized that ‘he does not know who the source of information for the consortium of journalists was, but the journalists received a portion of their data.’ Critics, primarily Ivan Radosavljević, recognized for sharing views with the current authorities, criticized the existence of ‘centers of power within the profession,’ which are ‘impossible to identify and determine who they work for.’ They also noted the ‘strange absence of American citizens’ in all the leaked documents. The segment also featured statements from Siniša Mali and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, who ironically ‘congratulated KRIK journalists on their professionalism,’ as they did not attend a press conference held by Minister Mali, where they could have posed questions to him and substantiated their investigation. KRIK representatives claim that they were unaware of the press conference and further argue that the assertion that the opposition is absent is incorrect, as they had already published financial reports and topics serving as a basis for criticizing the opposition on their website.

In an in-depth interview for this segment, journalist Anica Telesković, who had been investigating the topic for years, including as a journalist for *Politika*, discussed her work on the Panama Papers. This project, launched

by KRIK in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, allowed Telesković to freely search Panama's public business registry by country of origin or company founder's name, and publish the full information. She cross-referenced data from both Serbian and Panamanian registries. Telesković emphasized that while offshore business is not illegal, its legitimacy is questionable, especially when figures like the Serbian Minister of Finance are implicated. She also noted that while the Pandora Papers marked the sixth leak of offshore documents by the American Consortium, data leaks from U.S. offshore zones are extremely rare.

“Unlike WikiLeaks, which made all documents publicly available to everyone, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists did not follow the same approach. KRIK operated in a similar manner. Furthermore, the data provided was selectively published, with the editorial team deciding to disclose the names of individuals deemed to be of public interest. Additionally, in one of the cases involving data leaks from offshore zones (the FinCEN leaks), KRIK published a response to a denial but did not publish the denial from the Mineko company. As a result, the Press Council ruled that KRIK violated the journalistic code of ethics in this specific case.”

The preceding context clearly addresses the principles of journalistic work and raises the questions this paper examines. First and foremost, the publication of information and data of public interest, in a timely and comprehensive manner, is the essence of journalistic work and represents the 'elite' aspect of journalism. However, the perception of such information in an environment that has become extremely polarized introduces a new topic and a new phenomenon, where even elite investigative journalism can fall into the trap of instruction, external agendas, and misuse. Simultaneously, it highlights the perception of the 'other' in a media-polarized environment, where principles of work, safety, freedom, and detection of pressure are demanded only for journalists within one's own media spectrum, from both sides of the media divide.

Everything that happened at that time was pressure. From both sides of the media spectrum. This proves that pressures do not only come from the government or the opposition, but also from colleagues and social media. It started with one of the KRIK journalists greeting the RTS team

at the editorial door with the words, ‘Welcome, we’ve been waiting for you for six years.’ Then there was the case where another KRIK journalist, despite my refusal to take a photo for Twitter in the KRIK newsroom, as proposed by Dojčinović, secretly photographed me and the cameraman. She then posted this on Twitter, after which, before the segment aired, insults were directed at us, along with threats that the cameraman and I would end up like Milanović.⁹¹ Furthermore, pro-government tabloids questioned RTS’s right to invite Stevan Dojčinović to the show before the segment aired, while opposition media, after the segment was broadcast, questioned RTS’s right to invite Ivan Radovanović, a columnist for *Informer*. Pressure came from both sides of the media spectrum, both before and after the segment. In the segment, I also cited an example of *Washington Post* journalists, who, while reporting on this topic, always mentioned that they found the name of Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon, in the offshore zone, who is also a co-owner of their company. Of course, journalists from United Media, while reporting on data that leaked from Luxembourg, did not mention that their co-owner was also conducting business through an offshore zone.’

Among the items that do not constitute the work of ‘good journalism,’ Telešković considers that she did not personally investigate the accusations related to the Minister of Finance. Instead, she merely relayed the claims from KRIK and his response, without providing clear evidence as to what exactly was true.

“I didn’t complete the investigative work properly because the pressures from both sides intensified before the segment aired. We aired the story quickly, sacrificing quality to avoid reputational damage. This segment highlighted media polarization: pro-government media saw it as targeting foreign intelligence, while opposition media viewed it as focusing on regime collaborators. Both sides misinterpreted the piece, but ultimately, both KRIK and *Informer*, along with Ivan Radovanović and Stevan Dojčinović, are part of Serbia’s media landscape. It is my right to record both of them”.

91 Former director of Radio Television of Serbia, Dragoljub Milanović, who was confronted by demonstrators during the protests on October 5, 2000, and who served a ten-year prison sentence for his responsibility in the deaths of 16 RTS workers during the NATO bombing on April 23, 1999 (editor’s note).

Conclusion

Investigative stories produced through collaborative journalism offer particular value to journalists and countries where media outlets lack the resources to conduct such in-depth investigations on their own. However, in the current environment in Serbia, the analysis of reactions to investigative content reveals the extreme form of media polarization, where even “elite” journalism can fall into the trap of being manipulated by external instructions, agendas, and misuse.

Pro-government and critically-oriented media, which were subjects of analysis in this case, employed familiar media strategies to underscore their ideological positions or media agendas. The pro-government tabloids, following an established pattern, worked on creating parallel narratives (even through fabricated “Veritas” documents) and employed the principle of reverse burden of proof, targeting the opposition. They claimed that opposition members and their media either “ordered” the investigative documents or were involved in illegal activities themselves. On the other hand, the principle of the critically-oriented media was based on affirming the available documents without critically analyzing them or questioning their content and integrity, focusing only on the individuals implicated in the Pandora Papers, rather than on the broader context or the full scope of the documents.

Finally, the behavior of investigative journalists toward the one side attempting to present the views of all relevant parties in this matter reflects a serious breach of professional standards and contributes to creating an atmosphere for media witch-hunts from those who should be the least expected to engage in such practices. These are journalists who are frequently the targets of such witch-hunts orchestrated by the government.

In this way, any information entering the media spectrum is shaped to reinforce or support the existing media narratives. This leads to a societal awareness where events become mere tools to confirm media and political positions, often accompanied by journalistic bias. The divide between the polarized media factions deepens, dragging journalists and professional standards of journalism into the void, leaving room for professional corrections, but also for continued scholarly and expert analyses.

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KOLABORATIVNO NOVINARSTVO U RALJAMA MEDIJSKE POLARIZACIJE: SLUČAJ PANDORA PAPIRA U SRBIJI

Sažetak

Kolaborativno novinarstvo predstavlja ključan aspekt istraživačkog novinarstva, omogućujući dubinsko istraživanje kroz timove novinara diljem različitih zemalja. Ovaj model rada lokalnim novinarima, koji su često izloženi ekonomskim i političkim pritiscima, omogućuje provođenje temeljitih istraga koje bi bilo teško ostvariti samostalno. Međutim, u polariziranom medijskom okruženju, kolaborativno novinarstvo često reflektira agende obje strane medijskog spektra.

Ovaj rad analizira kako su Pandora Papiri (2021.) postali dio polariziranih medijskih agendi u Srbiji, s posebnim naglaskom na razotkrivanje offshore poslovnih aktivnosti srpskih dužnosnika putem istraživačke mreže KRIK-a. U analizi se uspoređuje percepcija tih otkrića u dva suprotstavljena medijska izvora – opozicijski nastrojenom N1 i provladinom Informeru, kao i u izvještavanju javnog servisa RTS-a. Cilj je otkriti na koji su način istraživački nalazi interpretirani kako bi se uskladili s ideološkim pozicijama različitih medijskih aktera.

Rezultati pokazuju da su otkrića istraživačkih novinara bila tumačena na načine koji odgovaraju ideološkim matricama jedne ili druge strane medijskog spektra.

Ključne riječi: kolaborativno novinarstvo, istraživačko novinarstvo, KRIK, medijska polarizacija, Pandora papiri