

DIVING DEEP INTO DATA



with Journalists for Transparency member **Natalija Jovanovic**

Journalists frequently struggle to obtain information from official sources. Institutions and organisations often find ways to sidestep their requests, ignoring them or flatly refusing to make information available. This sometimes leaves journalists with no choice but to rely on sources within these institutions to leak the information they need to report candidly on issues.

This unfortunate reality obliges the media in general and journalists in particular to put together appropriate strategies, skills and tools to solve the problem. Building a solid pool of sources is one potential solution. Another necessary skill is learning how to read and interpret raw data in order to extract relevant information.



INTRODUCTION

Natalija Jovanovic works with Journalists for Transparency as a journalist and media researcher. She graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade in 2016. During her student years, Natalija interned at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), where she worked on media privatisation and public media tenders. Today she is an investigative journalist with the organisation.

In a country where access to information is limited, Jovanovic's efforts to obtain accurate and reliable facts and figures are frequently frustrated. In theory, Serbia's Freedom of Information (FOI) law allows journalists to call for data, documents and information, but in practice, this is not the case. When Jovanovic investigated a story with Ana Curic for Transparency International some years ago, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs failed to provide the information the pair needed for their research on maternity leave compensation.



CHALLENGES

Serbian government institutions are under strict central control. As a result of the government's deliberate lack of transparency, wildly inaccurate statistics were fed to the public at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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From the very early days of the breakout, local reporters struggled to find data on how the pandemic was progressing. One failing was that official numbers on infections and deaths reflected only the national picture, with virtually no data available at municipal or regional level. Institutions sometimes unashamedly misled the public, publishing dramatically reduced numbers not only of deaths but also of hospital admissions caused by the virus.

Very soon, the media and many other observers became suspicious and began to question the government figures.

“For example, of the total death count declared for one day during the early stages of the pandemic, official figures showed that one small town in central Serbia supposedly accounted for more than 50 percent of all the cases in the country,” Jovanovic says.

After putting in an official freedom of information (FOI) request for data to Serbia’s Institute of Public Health – and being given the runaround – Jovanovic and her colleagues managed to find a dataset from a newly installed information system.

The leak was a bombshell, revealing that the true Covid-19 death-count was no less than three times higher than the official government figures. The immediate question was how to verify this information.

“The biggest challenge we faced at that time was how to fact check an institution that was lying and deliberately lowering the number of fatalities. Proof was all around us – increased numbers of funerals, sources from the hospitals reporting greater numbers of deaths, statisticians explaining that the probability of the number of daily deaths as it was presented was almost impossible,” Jovanovic explains.

However, nothing was done to correct the situation until mid-2021, when the Ministry of Health instituted a commission to review the figures. The government subsequently acknowledged that the real numbers were higher than the officially publicised figures, but nothing changed. The official statements stayed the same, and no one was held to account for misleading the populace.

To further complicate matters, Jovanovic received the leaked database only days before a parliamentary election. This presented several problems.

“The whole moment was tense and the topic very delicate. There were many challenges to overcome before publishing the story in the first place, but fact checking the information was the biggest headache of all,” she says.

After collecting the database from her source, Jovanovic went back to the office and studied the data with her colleagues. They proved a massive revelation, providing details on the totals of people who had died from the virus, including their dates of birth, test results and dates, and the hospitals they had died at. But verifying the information still presented an uphill battle.

“It was impossible to check each case. Database security experts also examined the data to help verify it. After we’d done everything in our power to fact check the information, we decided there were no mistakes and eventually published the story. We never received any official rebuttal from the institutions,” Jovanovic says.

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One of Jovanovic's biggest dilemmas was whether to publish the article or wait for a response from the Institute of Public Health, which wasn't forthcoming anytime soon. She was still hoping that the discrepancy in figures was due to some bureaucratic slip up or bungle.

"I hoped it was a mistake because I couldn't begin to understand why someone would hide information about people getting infected by and dying from a virus for which there was no cure. We never learned the reasons why the officials hid the scale of the pandemic in Serbia. At the time, many argued that the upcoming elections might have been the reason. Maybe they thought people would be too afraid to vote, resulting in a low turnout and leaving the ruling party without sufficient votes to stay in power," she says.

However, after deliberating the pros and cons of publishing, and after the director of the PIH failed to show up for a meeting they had scheduled a few days earlier, the team decided to publish. It was the day after the elections. The exposé – entitled "Serbia underreported Covid-19 deaths and infections, data shows" – was quoted or mentioned more than 500 times in regional and international media outlets, eliciting reaction and comments from politicians, health experts, journalists, international organisations and others. It appeared in more than 15 media outlets in nearly 40 countries. It was well received in Serbia, too, being the most-read piece on the BIRN website, and – unusually – the mainstream media also republished it.



SOLUTIONS

The report's biggest legacy was that the government and the Ministry of Health agreed to revise the official data a year after it was published, conceding vast discrepancies between the publicised numbers and those in the Covid-19 information system.

"But this revision had its own problems," Jovanovic says. "It was not based on independent research but rather on regular internal data collected by the statistics office. Yet the commission appointed to revise the Covid-related deaths presented the revised numbers as independent research at a news conference."



LEARNINGS

This was Jovanovic's first major story, and she wishes she could have managed her stress levels better.

"In the beginning, I was very much afraid that my source might be revealed and would come to harm. This is something I was constantly worried about in the weeks after we published. I wish I could have dealt with that situation differently."

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TAKEOUTS

The story's success can probably be ascribed to its high relatability, confirming early suspicions that something was wrong with the official Covid-19 numbers.

Although it made headlines for several days, government officials could not explain the discrepancies, nor did they confirm or deny that figures had been manipulated.

Had the public been given accurate information, they might have taken the vaccination drive more seriously. As it was, by November 2021, Serbia had one of the lowest vaccination rates in the world. According to Johns Hopkins University, only 37% of Serbia's population is fully vaccinated. (Serbian officials stated that the vaccination rate passed 50% during August 2021. Vaccination rates are not reported daily in Serbia officially.)



DISCUSSION POINTS

- What strategies can you pursue when you're persistently brushed off by government officials?
- How can you verify facts and figures that have been manipulated to obfuscate information?
- The job of the journalist is to persistently seek and find important truths. Where do you begin to look for these?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Clerix, Kristof. “Nine essential tools from data ICIJ’s data journalism and programming experts”

How do you tackle some of history’s largest data leaks?

ICIJ’s data journalists, gurus and programmers share the secrets of their digital tool belts. <https://www.icij.org/inside-icij/2018/08/nine-essential-tools-from-icijs-data-journalism-and-programming-experts/>

Silverman, Craig. “Verification and Fact Checking”. Interesting article that explores the similarities and differences between verification and fact checking, and includes suggested processes for both. The Data Journalism website contains a plethora of verification resources for different media. <https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/verification-1/additional-materials/verification-and-fact-checking>

Public Media Alliance “A list of resources for journalists, broadcasters and media organisations who want to use data in their work”

<https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/tools/data-journalism-tools/>

Fact Checking list on the Journalists’ Toolbox. The encyclopedia of fact checking and verification resources from the world’s most respected sources. https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/2022/05/11/urban_legendsfact-checking/

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