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NEW TRENDS OF DEVELOPMENT IN ALBANIAN JOURNALISM
IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to analyze the modern tendencies of journalism development in Albanian mass media in the digital era. Recently social networks, blogs, different information sites in the Internet have become an important and actual element affecting the political, social and economic development of different layers of the society. Thus, the importance of the article is in the necessity of further research of the journalism development in the practice of regional Albanian mass media in the digital economy. Frankly speaking, the role of mass media in Albania is very important especially in the society, government, way of life, culture and so on. The author of the article describes new concepts, such as differentiation, distribution, news networks and spatiality to explain journalism in the epoch of digital technologies in Albania, and offers conceptions which add to the theory of technologies as a fundamental part of the journalism, such as actants and materiality in Albanian mass media. Besides, the article represents theoretical tools which help understand evolution of journalism in different social and cultural contexts, including innovations, keeping isolated gates and meditative interconnectedness in Albanian mass media. Finally, the article deals with factors increasing the growth of on-line mass media and social networks, as an innovation appeared on the traditional media-scene during the last decades due to the growth of popularity and introduction of innovative technologies and personal computers.

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1. Introduction

With the appearance of the Internet in Albania some authors thought that “public journalism” will enter “the second phase” (Dunas, 2013) where the control over the news will be more balanced between the journalists and users (Thurman & Newman, 2014). Appearance of city journalism and acceptance of the user generated content and main mass media in Albania received great attention within the journalist investigation.

Nevertheless, the literature on the “joint journalism” can be criticized for being concentrated on the industrial sphere. While the researchers used methods of the content analysis, ethnography of the news department and depth interviews to study how (professional) journalists deal with the user generated content and audience participation in news very little studies paid attention to the users themselves (Pavlik, 2001). The exception is the study *Albania Facebook Page Statistics*, which conducted a series of the focus-groups to study the opinion poll about the value of the consumers’ participation in the news.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the Internet distribution there are differences in all the country and different factors influencing the Internet access. The Department of Journalism and Communication in the State University of Tirana conducted a national poll in 2015 on several aspects of digitalization which showed that in remote areas the Internet access is difficult: in city centers the access is close to 74 %, in other areas it is about 48 %.

It is evident that the level of the Internet penetration as a source of mass media is high; there is little information on the structure of the information sources used by the Albanian both in the traditional form of mass media and on-line and social networks.

3. Research Questions

The Internet popularity and its influence on the Albanian mass media. According to the data on the portal *Albania Internet Users*, by the July 2016 the level of the Internet popularity in Albania had been nearly 63 % comparing with 0.1 % in 2000. The data by the regulating body of the electronic communications also evidence constant growth of the Internet use among the Albanian population (Pavlik, 2001) in the last quarter of 2016 there was a growth among the mobile communication subscribers by 9.7 % and broadband access from the mobile lines by 10 % comparing with 2015.

Wide application of the mobile phones contributed to wider access of the Albanians to the Internet. Despite some decrease in the number of the mobile users in 2016 comparing with the previous year, the number of users is rather high. The data for the traffic intensity to the Internet via mobile phones at the end of 2016 were higher by 118 % greater comparing with the Internet use in 2015.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is Albanian mass media in the 21st century and their role in the society. Most internet-portals publish the latest news without checking; aiming at receiving a large number of clicks from users choosing what is interesting for the public and not the social interest on the whole.

Moreover, the news portals copy the content from each other without reference. In the competition context the issues of the author's rights, are a priority for the managers of the news portals more than a professional ethics, according to the negotiation of the corrections on regulating the electronic commerce among the professionals.

The other influential phenomenon is a wide presence of *Facebook* and its use by the politics which results in the development of journalism in *Facebook* among the portals and conventional mass media (Dunas, 2013).

Such politics as Premier Minister, ex-Premier Minister, Mayor of Tirana, deputies, Ministers and other people are very active on *Facebook*, their every step and law become known as news on TV and news portals. However, mass media just copies the information from the *Facebook* but do not criticize it. Back coupling with the community is one more aspect where *Facebook* helped, which became a part of the political marketing.

Social networks help politics influence the social agenda and make people think in a special way. The issue is dubious whether society perceives the signals from the virtual world of the social networks or social networks reflect concern and passion of the society?

Some efforts to regulate the content of the Internet-media were undertaken as a result of the law "On electronic trade" in 2009 in Albania, which in 2013 had additional adjustments aimed at adduction of the Albanian legislation in correlation with EU directive on electronic trading.

According to the rules of the electronic trade, service providers, giving access to information to the third party are not responsible for the information if they did not know about its illegal character, as soon as they learn about its illegal character they must delete the information.

Besides, the law passes that the service providers are unindepted to manage information and prevent data trespass. These amendments went through several projects and consultative conferences with different subjects but the initiative was pended awaiting other changes in the EU acquis in the sphere.

Amendments suggested by Melinda Bregu have become one more important event in the legislation on regulating the mass media content. The suggested project was discussed in April 2015 in order to introduce a new article into the Civil Code introducing accountability for comments affecting dignity and reputation of the person.

The article specifies legal regulations of defamatory imputation applicable to the web-based media. The amendment will make managers of the electronic portals including media companies "prevent publication of any commentaries which wound dignity, personality or reputation of a person" (Vartanova, 2012, p. 12).

The main ground for such a proposal was the situation with pejorative comments of users in the Internet-portals and social networks as well as disposition on Delphi versus Estonia. In 2016 the deputy Melinda Bregu said that she called the amendment off.

Nowadays, nearly all researchers of the media processes agree that the Internet is one of the main suppliers of the news, ensuring “honest environment for the ideas struggle”. The professional field of the journalism is in constant changes in existing technological transformations. New instruments and practices appear leading to rethinking of the journalism in the digital era.

5. Research Methods

Analysis of mass media audience in Albania was rare, not systematic or information was not public which resulted in ventures in information consumer habits. In 2014 there was a population poll on using mass media. The data evidenced that the Albanian turn to the traditional mass media for true information even though online mass media have taken an independent stand. 73 % of respondents said that they are apt to trust the information on TV in comparison with 43 %, who trust radio and printed mass media, 46 %, who trust on-line mass media. According to the same poll, 89 % of the Albanians said that they watch TV every day in comparison with 42 %, who use the Internet and 25 % use the press. Besides, 84 % of the respondents determined the TV the main source of information for domestic political news.

The poll of people at the age 18-35 years shows the tendency to use mostly online sources of information: 67 % respondents at the age 18-35 years use the Internet as a source of information in comparison with 30 %, who use TV, whereas press and radio have achieved 1.6 % and 1.4 %, correspondingly. The time spent on watching TV is rather long, 37 % watch it from one hour to two per day, 29 % watch it more than two hours and 25 % watch it more than four hours.

It was interesting to see the evolution of these data in 2017 but the poll has not been still conducted. However, it is possible to find some information on the tendencies of media consuming from other polls, other scope and character, but trying to record the tendencies of the mass media popularity.

In particular, according to the public opinion poll in 2016, the TV is the main source of information, though the Internet, especially social networks become more popular. A great part of the respondents, 44 % said that they use the Internet and the sites of the news agencies to receive information on the current events. More people use social networks for it – 56 %.

It is a significant change in comparison with the same poll in 2014 when only 22 % and 14 % respondents correspondingly said that receive information on the current news from the Internet and social networks. Among the social networks, *Facebook* is the most popular among the Albanians. There were 1.4 million accounts in June 2016 which is half population. According to the data in 2015, 64 % of the users were men in comparison with 36%, of women. At the same time about 73 % of users were of 18–34 years old.

6. Findings

Fast distribution of the Internet and social networks in the country affected the conventional and virtual mass media and data medium. Nowadays it is difficult to distinguish between the conventional mass media, new mass media and social mass media from the point of view of technical dissemination channels, relative to the content distributed.

The issue whether new mass media have substituted the traditional ones is acute for the media society and media experts. On the one hand, absence of systematic and accessible data on the audience and readership, and absence in Albania of on-line tools for measuring the site-reach gives no true information on the distribution of the virtual mass media. This comparison is based on the interview with the representatives of mass media, or on the sources of information which according to the experts are not always reliable. Refusal of mass media organizations both traditional and digital to give information on their on-line audience does not allow having a good idea about the trends in popularity among the existing mass media.

Periodic research on this topic show a clear trend: “Rating of the most visited mass media in 2016 and their comparison with data in 2014 show the increase and distribution of the data medium in Albania” (Fuga, 2012, p. 162). The same data of the comparative research show that traditional media sites with better rating in 2016 in comparison with 2014 are limited by two TV stations, the rest most popular media whose popularity has increased are digital mass media. New mass media which become more popular refer to the news portals that are the Internet mass media which cover the news and give analysis of the general type including politics, economy, criminal news, culture and gossips and positive news.

The number of news internet-portals nowadays is not known, when the Albanian journalists themselves say that there are about 65022 such portals. It is impossible to prove this number as the preliminary registration is not necessary.

Nowadays, almost all conventional mass media have their web-sites, and it is difficult to find conventional or data media which have no account on *Facebook*. In fact, having *Facebook* accounts is not limited with certain mass media but has become a practice when all big shows, whether political or entertaining have their account on *Facebook*, where they socialize with people (Lewis & Powers, 2014).

This practice is very useful for increasing popularity of the mass media, especially digital which are not always known to population as well as conventional mass media.

Mass media do not give data on their traffic or on-line audience. Nevertheless, several interviews showed that presence in the social networks is very important, as in some cases mass media which gave data on the issue showed a high percentage of the referral traffic which was from the social networks but not from the organic traffic.

Besides, the advertisement in the social networks especially in *Facebook* seems to improve the rating, popularity and visibility of new mass media. Last years for many mass media in Albania paid advertising campaigns in *Facebook* had a greater impact than just a number of followers. This practice has often been used by many new online mass media, set up during 2015 and 2016.

Among the top ten the most popular accounts on *Facebook* nowadays is only *Top Channel TV* from the conventional mass media which is one of the most famous TV stations in the country, commercial, national, and TV station. Other accounts are commercial (*Atom computers*, *Shpresa Computers* and so on) and accounts of the show-business publicities (*ErmalMamaqi*, *GentaIsmajli*). Other accounts are hybrid ones which combine current news with humorous or “virus” content, often close to vulgar.

Nowadays, there are three such pages among the top ten accounts on *Facebook* in Albania, *Jetaoshqef* (*Life is fun*), *Origjinale* (*Original*) and *Shqiperiaime* (*My Albania*).

In fact, their ability to attract people by giving the content and not serious information is the key factors of their success. Sometimes, a web-site contains commentaries by people, accusing some breach of justice especially by the powers, for example, videos, where they are stopped by the police, recording violations of the law. Information that *Jetaoshqef* and other similar sites have well recorded classical journalist news is highly questionable. Nevertheless, the fact that these accounts are more popular than conventional mass media or even news portals on *Facebook*, is something to be taken into account when estimating the content people like most of all.

New means of mass media and social networks offer journalists more opportunities and freedom to express their opinions and reports on different issues which are not welcome in the conventional mass media, at least theoretically.

In this connection there is a tendency to transfer to data medium. It has started whether as an attempt to start something new, to find more freedom, or disagreement with former traditional mass media. These portals include *lapsi.al*, set up by Arman Shkullaku and Andi Bushati, *360grade.al* set up by Artur Zhedgi, *politiko.el* set up by Alfred Leloy, *perqasje.com* set up by Artur Nura.

It is difficult to speak about clear translation to digital technologies, but better to speak about channel duplication. Although, some famous journalists have created their portals, the same journalists appear regularly in the current programs, which are daily broadcasted on several TV stations in Albania. At the same time, internet portals use different ways of communication including web-TV, photo galleries and other forms of communication used by the conventional mass media.

We cannot deny that the digital mass media and social media provide more relaxed atmosphere from the point of view of editorial; freedom than conventional mass media.

Journalists and media experts are more skeptical about the freedom, which comes with new media and social media. “We still do not see the examples of such wide freedom but this kind of communication facilitated the access to the society may be sometimes too much”.

However, some journalists and editors say, they were fired as the result of publications on *Facebook* on their personal accounts which were aimed against certain people and political actors or were accused by the mass media where they worked.

In this context there were cases when *Facebook* or social networks played a very important role in reports when the conventional mass media were not ready to speak about certain themes. For example, one of the recent protests of a small village whose houses had been damaged for many years after an international oil company drilled the land. After several protests they decided to walk to the capital and find the solution, the process which lasted for several days.

Due to self-censorship and advertising cliché in the conventional mass media this event was unreported or briefly, sketchily reported, though it was unusual news and of great interest for the society, comments and messages on *Facebook* did not let the protest to be forgiven and even mobilized some people to join the protestants.

One more egregious case is an inquisitional program *Publicus*, broadcasted in *Vizion Plus TV*, where the authorities refused to broadcast their own investigation of an under-age murder, who worked on the waste deposit in Tirana, violation of labour law and others no fulfillment of the law are understood.

The team published the information on the events and program on *Facebook*, and on *YouTube*, where it was viewed for many times in a short period of time.

In a week this program in solidarity was broadcasted by *Opinion in TV Klan*, one of the most popular programs in the country. It is an example when social mass media provide freedom and possibilities more than conventional mass media but taking into account that the program was broadcasted by one of the popular show in the country it is not clear what channel was more effective from the point of view of distributing information.

In fact, sometimes it is difficult to say one news channel from another as they deliver nearly the same content, sometimes changing the title and copy/pasting the text from each other with mistakes and fake news. For example, fake news on *Facebook* Mark Tsukerberg telling that his ancestors were Albanian had been copied by several portals before somebody understood that it was fake news.

It is a pity there are more cases of fake news published in the Albanian mass media or in social networks and in conventional mass media. There are problems, especially in the Internet mass media with the sources and facts management. It breaks confidence and lowers professional standards.

It is a pity, debates on fake news in Albania are still acute and are not an institutional part of the news air. Some experts see a solution to this problem in communication among the professionals especially in self regulation and creating a healthy media environment. This main aim has turned out to be unreachable for Albanian media professionals for many years.

One more problem caused by the absence of self regulation and labour etiquette is violation of the author's rights which is one of the important issues for journalists and portal administrators.

In case when the content is similar and the same articles circulate round, news portals try to publish news as fast as they can which is not a good example. An increase in mass media and social media is reversely proportional to the professionalism in journalism.

7. Conclusion

It is evident that information and communication practices in digital media and social networks in Albania will be in priority in the nearest future as well as the professionalism of the conventional mass media to develop professionally, be up-to-date and react to the needs of the audience and trends.

Though, it is all acute for the development of trends in the media scale and for economic model of the Albanian mass media themselves, value of news and information, respect to the professional standards are the same, at least in theory. Nowadays, the digital mass media encounter numerous problems connected with the professionalism, including even basic everyday procedures, such as facts and sources checking, tabloid making, sensational content, issues of the authors' rights and so on.

On the other hand, conventional mass media have entered the digital media game recently, creating their own web-sites and platforms and eroding boundaries between online and conventional mass media. Theoretically, on-line and social media provide greater freedom for journalists.

Mass media globalization in Albania is directly connected with the whole process of media-market globalization. This function is fulfilled by big influential newspapers and magazines.

Though these mass media are considered conventional their activity in the modern conditions is already impossible without broad use of the Internet as a powerful channel of information dissipation.

Thanks to digital technologies nearly any, even a provincial newspaper with little circulation, published on-line becomes a global edition if it has a great number of visits and subscribers from different parts of the world.

Thus, a new form of readership appears not restricted by the place of issuing the mass media.

At the same time, when there is no self-regulation and professional standards and behaviour. In the future, probably, the legislation for the mass media in Albania will be tightened.

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