

Ownership, crucial cause for the crisis of newspapers in Albania

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Abstract

Albanian daily newspapers are in crisis. A part of it is caused by interventions of newspapers' financiers in their editorial policies in order to realize their influence. Albanian newspapers are funded mainly by business. In this research we will prove the hypothesis that publishers have managed to distort reporting of journalists and that they in fact are the real editorial authorities of daily newspapers in Albania.

Result of this intervention is the decreased quality of the press, censorship and self-censorship on journalists. This has led to the decline of public interest for newspapers.

This research will be based on interviews with leading directors of newspapers but also newspaper financiers, articles that address issues of media ownership in Albania, field research through surveys with journalists, and various reports of media monitoring.

Key words: Generalist Newspapers, Editorial Policy, Editorial staff, Funded print, Circulation

Introduction

Albanian press can easily be considered a funded one. Almost all newspapers are funded from other sources and can not survive only with incomes provided by newspapers through advertising and sales. Albanian media is in crisis because of its ownership which is a characteristic of this media only. A similar situation with crises faced by Albanian press is not seen almost anywhere else in Europe, where business feeds the media and at the same time it is road towards its ending.

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Albania has 26 daily newspapers, of which 18 are generalist. Their daily edition ranges from 60,000 to 80,000 copies, while slightly more than half of them are sold. The cost of newspaper production in Albania exceeds the revenue from sales and advertising. Only two or three newspapers have slightly positive balance between expenditures and income generated by the newspaper.

1. Lack of transparency of funding: Funders of daily newspapers do not ever make transparent the ways of funding media they own; to what extent they finance these newspapers and what money they make. "There is a total lack of transparency on funding of media products ... the situation is unclear and unknown", is noted in a report of Soros for Albanian media¹.

Newspapers in Albania have no legal obligation to publish their circulation through which part of costs will be made public. Public administration authorities, such as the tax department officials, do not provide information about these businesses and do not force them to publish their balance sheets.

Media owners, interested to be known as media owners: But while they do not make the funding transparent, they are publicly known as owners of newspapers, although this is not required by law. Albanian media owners do not hide such a thing and if there is any reason that makes them stay away from this type of ownership, will be purely temporary. They do their best to show that they own one or more media, and not only that, but also affect the media inevitably. Some of them put the name at the head of a newspaper. *Shekulli* newspaper, the largest in Albania until 2009, publishes every day the publisher's name, Koco Kokëdhima, on the first page and not the name of newspaper publishing company. The same thing happens with *Mapo* newspaper which also publishes on the front page the name of its publisher, Henry Cili, not the company that owns the newspaper. Media in Tirana even in daily conversations are identified with the owner's name. For example, instead of *Shekulli* the newspaper is often called Koço's (Koco Kokëdhima), instead of being called *Mapo*, the

¹ Thanas Goga "Footprint of financial crisis in the media" Albania country report Commissioned by Open Society Institute, Tirana, December 2009.

newspaper is called the newspaper of Cili (Henry Cili). Owners are trademarks of newspapers as much as the title for this media. Even in Albania, as in many countries of Europe, and specifically in Eastern Europe, it is not an obligation to reveal their ownership in the media. In a search for media ownership that has been done by Access it results that only four of 20 European countries where the research on the transparency of ownership was conducted have an obligation to show the kind of company that owns a print media, but not more than four².

Owners make visible their ownership of newspapers to increase their influence in political decision-making and to put pressure on administration for benefits associated with other businesses that they have.

2. How is the profit secured by the newspapers that suffer losses? Print media owners do not earn from these media in most cases, or earn very little in rare cases. Almost all the time they suffer losses, but they keep their media even though the balance sheet is negative, something which they would not practice with any other business that they own, for example the production of bricks, beer production, oil extraction etc.

"Subsidies" can go up to a figure between 2 to 5 million euros per year. Why the owners continue to pay out of their pockets for newspapers published? Because gaining is secured for the investing industry through exercising political influence to the government, administration, etc. Conversations with actors of this industry provide a consistent answer: Newspapers are considered to be powerful tools. They can be used to launch attacks against competitors or opponents, while also functioning as "insurance" against attacks from other publishers. Editorial staff say they are under pressure to consider business interests over political interests", is noted in a report of OSCE regarding the market of press media in Albania³.

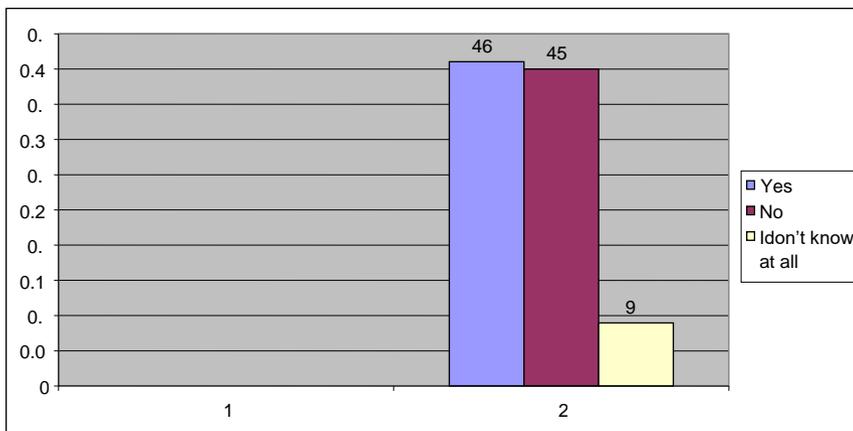
² "Transparency of media ownership in Europe" A report for the High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, access-info.org/, f.4.

³ Vibjorn Madsen "Business Prospects for Albanian Print Media", OSCE, Tiranë, 2012, f.5.

3. Owners have access to reporters and content of newspaper:

Media owners are usually friends with managers of their newspapers, with journalists working in the media, and hierarchy sometimes is built according to the degree of friendship and personal opinions of owners regarding managers or reporters of newspaper they own. During a survey conducted in 2011, with reporters of the largest newspapers in the country, about half of them said they are friends or have contacts with media owners where they are employed and that these contacts influence or are related to the news. "Nearly half of reporters, 46 percent recognize that they met and talked with the owner about subjects of their articles or news published in the newspaper. They also talk about the work done whe in meetings in the office, at the café or even over the phone. Other 45 percent know the owner of the media where they work but have not met him/her. Also they have not talked on the phone with the owner of the paper (or newspaper owners) regarding the news, the subject of their choice and the publication. While 9 percent of them do not know who owns the media where they work"⁴ (see Figure 1).

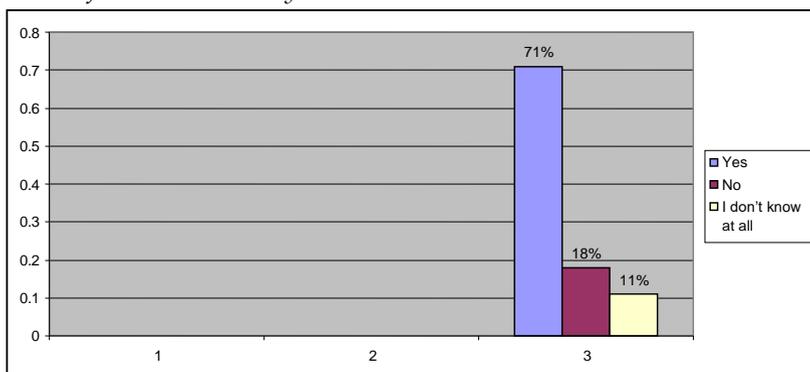
Figure 1. *Graphic presentation of the relationship between the owner of the newspaper and reporters. Do you have contacts with the owner of the media where you work?*



⁴ Anketim "Roli i reporterit në krizën e medias së shkruar", të gjitha gazetat, dhjetor 2010-shkurt 2011 Tiranë

There are newspapers where the percentage of contacts with the owner is much higher than average. In *Shekulli* newspaper 71% of reporters had daily contact with the owner of newspaper at the time the survey was made (see chart 2). The density of contacts is about 25 percent higher than the average for the Albanian press⁵.

Figure 2 *Graphic presentation of relationship of journalists at Shekulli newspaper with the owner of the newspaper. Do you have contacts with the owner of the media where you work?*



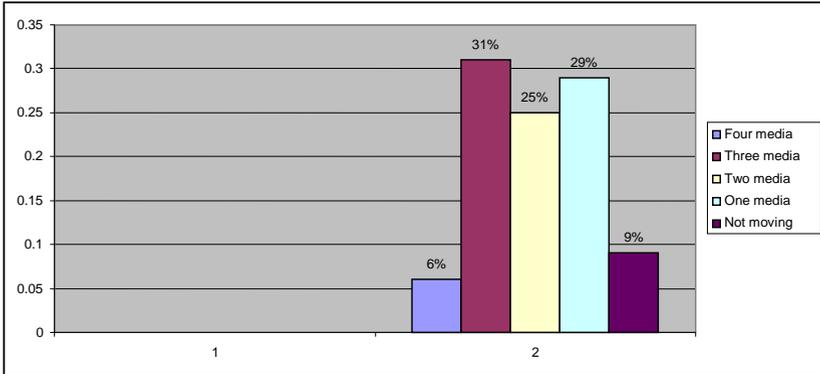
These figures reflect the impact of ownership on the daily work of journalists and profoundly affect the quality of reporting. Many journalists apply censorship and self-censorship due to this relationship. The phenomenon is impacting more young reporters because of low professionalism, aggravating conditions of work, low wages and lack of contracts. They accept pressure from publishers in exchange for changing their status in the future.

Censorship, auto censorship, working conditions cause the fact that reporters often move from one newspaper to another. Mobility of journalists is very high in the Albanian press. They have been working on average for ten years in newspapers and during this period around 31 per percent of them have changed newspapers three times, while 25 percent have changed newspapers twice. Only 9

⁵ Anketim "Roli i reporterit në krizën e medias së shkruar", gazeta Shekulli, dhjetor 2010-shkurt 2011 Tiranë

percent of journalists have not changed the newspaper where they work (ibid.)⁶. (see chart 3).

Figure. 3 Graphic presentation of the mobility of journalists from one media to another



4. Non media related reasons for the media resistance:
“Describing the current situation of print media, Remzi Lani says that at the center of survival of small media that is sold in low numbers in Tirana are the non media related reasons. "Newspapers in Albania survive because of extra-media reasons, they survive because of the owners' interests, not because of the audience. At this point in Albania it is difficult to make forecasts," he says⁷. He then continues by adding that in other countries the key word is the word "market", "market". In the case of Albania, says Lani, I hesitate to use the word "market", and uses the word "scene". Why? Talking about the market has some rules, market rules. If we apply these rules to the market, 26 newspapers can not survive. Albanian market with 3 million inhabitants can not hold so many newspapers, with some papers that go up to 20 thousand copies the largest one, and up to one thousand copies several small ones. With an advertising market also quite limited, 60 million euros, of which not more than 7-8 million are allocated for newspapers, there

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⁷ Remzi Lani "Tabloidizimi i gazetave, problem unik shqiptar" Reporteri, nr1 Tirane 2011, f.3.

is no market logic that could justify the existence of such newspapers, says Lani⁸.

The effect of media owners in the print media market is also described by Mero Baze, a reporter and the same time the publisher of the daily newspaper Tema. "We are in a market without competition, in a market where no newspaper, television or radio goes bankrupt, because it is not read, watched or heard. Rather the opposite, even when you're the most read one, if you were not part of this forgery you die from hunger.... What is happening is a clinical death of journalism", said Baze⁹.

This type of role that media publishers in Albania have in fact keeps alive the newspapers and makes foggy the real reasons why the press in Albania is in crisis when many signs of press crisis in the West are not manifested in the Albanian press.

Simply said, publishers have a positive role in the crisis since they finance the press, which otherwise would go bankrupt. From 1997 until 2012 the business has opened 13 daily generalist newspapers (*Shekulli, Korrieri, Panorama, Dita, Ekspres, Sot, Ballkan, Metropol, Tirana Observer, Shqip, Standard, Mapo, Libertas*). Only three of them have gone bankrupt (*Korrieri, 2009; Libertas 2009, Ekspres 2004*).

But in fact they finance the interests of those that put them into operation by alienating the informative role of the printed press. Under the influence of owners the press reports events and trends according to the interest of the business that funds them, influencing policy or public administration.

In the end, despite the money put in print media by business, "economic situation of Albanian print media is difficult and it makes print media unstable and with slim chance of survival. Most of them are companies with negative balance sheets and, if the law on

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⁹ Mero Baze "Media përdoret si trampolinë nga gazetarët" Reporteri, nr 1, Tiranë 2011, f.3.

transparency of financial balances and bankruptcy would function as it should, certainly some of them would be closed. "¹⁰

5. Owners, often editorial authorities of the newspaper:

Businesses are managing to put in their hands the editorial policies of daily newspapers in Albania.

First, they use their funding for newspapers to put pressure on newspaper executives (director or editor) so that they implement editorial lines related to their businesses.

Second, through differentiated salaries for the staff of newspapers, too high salaries for newspaper executives and too low for reporters. In cases when the increase is not sufficient to buy editor's integrity, they are dismissed and forced to leave the newspaper. Since 2005 it created such a practice where publishers send away experienced executives who had high salaries and replaced them with new inexperienced directors with very low wages. National daily newspaper, *Standard* began its publication in 2005 and since then it has changed four executives; newspaper *Shqip* that began publication in 2006 has changed four such executives; newspaper *Shekulli* that began in 1997 has changed five executives. Other newspapers have generally changed two or three newspaper executives. Through this way they actually solve two problems: i) avoid obstacles in interfering in the editorial policy of the newspaper and the new leader is more attainable than the old one; and, ii) it reduce costs by hiring a newspaper executive with a smaller salary.

When these two ways mentioned above do not work then they assign as a newspaper executive their family members or they take up direction on their own. The owner of the newspaper *Shekulli*, among the major newspapers in the country, since the beginning of 2012 until May 2013 appointed himself as editor of the newspaper. At least four daily newspapers in Albania are lead by the newspaper owners or their relatives.

¹⁰ Mark Marku "Mediat shqiptare dhe specifikat e tregut lokal" <http://al.ejo-online.eu/293/ekonomia-e-medias/mediat-shqiptare-dhe-specifikat-e-tregut-lokal>

6. The relationship of media owners with politics of politicians:

To identify this point of view we should build not so much arbitrary classification of newspapers, in newspapers that are close to the opposition and newspaper that are close to the government. Media that support oppositions are usually more stable with the staff and editorial policies, in this ideological line occasionally there also created journalists media "55" (1997), *Tema* (1999), *Dita* (2012), *Shqiptarja.com* (2011).

Media close to the government are not sustainable in staff. They reflect the diversity but only within the larger ideological line; criticism is lacking and they act as lobbyists. The above two situations reflect the position of media owner in relation to politics.

First case: Opposition is interested in media, but media owners are not interested so much in the opposition. Owners of media close to opposition do not influence much the editorial policies as their impact is not translated into a product for their businesses. These newspapers usually enjoy growing market position during their stay in opposition.

Second case: The government is interested in media and businesses are interested in government. Editorial policies are translated in product for their businesses.

It is a good editor the one who hears business needs and translates them into support for the government, sometimes when it is allowed or required by owners, even blackmail the government. It is a bad editor the one who makes professional resistance. In these cases, the product becomes less marketable.

Finally on this point: those that produce newspapers can they be considered as independent enterprises? I consider with this rather general question whether they are in a conflict of interest with the news they publish; therefore do they have a direct interest in government as they profit tenders, permits, licenses, concessions and these needs to develop their business influence the media have owned. In general this is the case. So companies are not independent if we put forward the statement of independence, in those qualities

required by the media as the fourth power. Thus journalists work in biased enterprises. That will be projected on the position of the company.

"Every newspaper builds its image, its reading contract, with readers finding the personal extent of necessary tension between news and discourse, between objectivity and subjectivity, between syntagmatic and paradigm," says Marrone¹¹. While prof. dr. Hamit Borici says how "lead the reader in vital activities." "Even most 'idealistic' newspaper" for independence and "neutrality", aims to influence the audience it addresses. It tries to achieve this by selecting information it conveys, the way of writing the news and logical accents"¹².

But in fact Albanian newspapers have not built a contract with readers that are inspired by such relationship, as required by Marrone, and they do not require that influence as defined by Borici. With the decline of professionalism, ethics and integrity, such contracts become formal or destroyed as they care only about the contract they have with the newspaper owner in favor of their interests. The actual impact is not the impact of the media, but the impact of financing business or political connections with it through the media impact on the public.

Because of the need to convey interests through daily newspaper, owned by business, they can not be divided into newspapers supporting left political parties, right political parties, or central but more on newspapers with pro-government and anti-government editorial policy.

To illustrate friendly relationship between businesses and the government we are initially taking into consideration monitoring data of newspapers for two months in a row, before, during and after the electoral campaign of 2005 by the Center for Transparency and Free Information (ACAC and NDI). We recall the monitoring for Panorama and Shekulli newspapers.

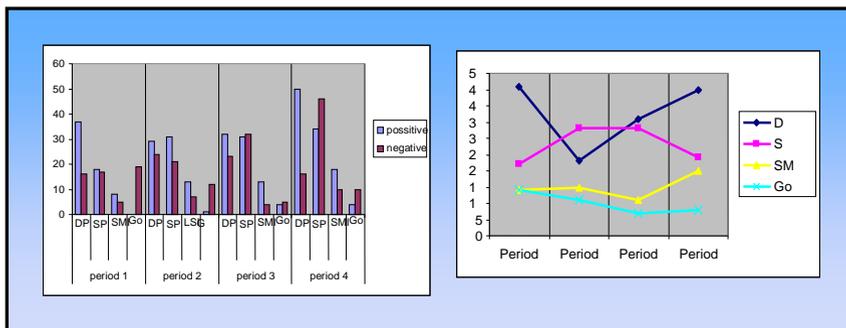
¹¹ Giafranco Marrone, *Trupat shoqërore*, Dudaj, Tiranë: 2008, f.105.

¹² Hamit Boriçi, Bashkim Gjergji etj, *Gazetaria-1, njohuri te pergjithshme*, SHBLU, Tiranë 2003, f. 39

For *Shekulli* newspaper:

Results of monitoring before and during the election campaign emphasize that "Significant changes in this paper show a growing support for the Democratic Party since the official start of the campaign. At the end of the campaign this newspaper has given a strong support for PD and has reduced the space for PS "13. *Shekulli* newspaper traditionally having leftist editorial policies suddenly appears on the side of the then right opposition, namely during the election campaign as the second figure shows in the graph where the blue line that represents the opposition goes climbing after the middle of the election campaign, so when the winner is more easily guessed, and PS presented with pink line goes down to deepen after the elections, which were won by the opposition that year

Grafiku 4. Presentation of political parties from *Shekulli* before, during and after the electoral campaign of 2005



For *Panorama* newspaper:

The same report describing the coverage of the then Prime Minister Fatos Nano and opposition leader, Sali Berisha (who won that election), states that in the early stages of monitoring (before the start of the election campaign and the first two weeks of the campaign) "Nano is presented in a balanced way while Berisha in a slightly negative context." In the last stage of monitoring (after the election), "Berisha received more positive context presentation while Nano is treated in a slightly negative context."

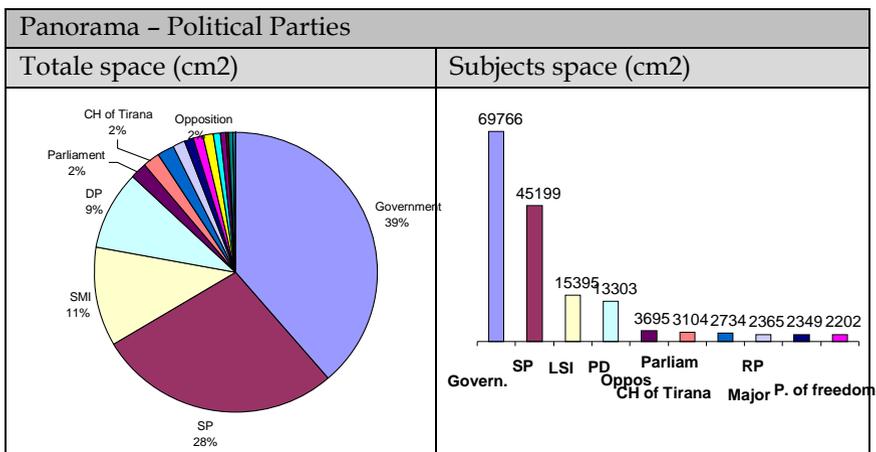
¹³ "Monitorimi i mediave, për Zgjedhjet Parlamentare 2005, Raporti Përfundimtar OSBE, NDI, USAID, British Embassy, Tiranë 2005, f.46.

Summary of monitoring for all media highlights that nearly in all media, the total time for the PD (which won) increased in the last week of the campaign.

Alignment of newspaper owners with political parties, but also the change of editorial policy, is also observed by another report on print media monitoring in 2009, which had almost the same methodology as the above and which was published after the parliamentary elections of that year . Let's have a look the behavior of *Panorama* and *Shekulli* according to this monitoring.

Panorama has generally been balanced regarding the two major political parties but has always given much room to LSI (LSI) and its leader Ilir Meta (third party in parliament, 4%). Sali Berisha, Edi Rama and Ilir Meta were given more space than other politicians in this newspaper. While Sali Berisha and Edi Rama have received more negative than positive references often associated with negative presentation, Ilir Meta, has almost no negative reference¹⁴.

Figure 5 Presentation of political parties by *Panorama* before, during and after the electoral compaign for parliamentary elections of 2009

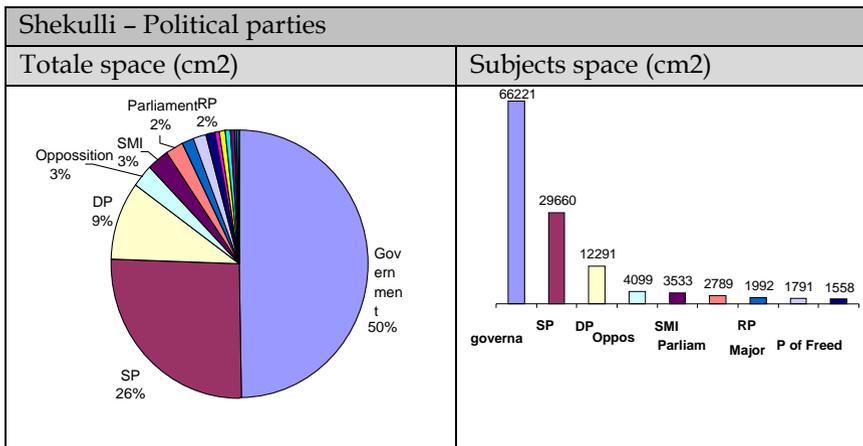


The same report describes the behavior of *Shekulli*. It concludes that *Shekulli* newspaper seems to be quite critical of the government,

¹⁴ Raporti i monitorimit “Promovimi i Transparencës Financiare dhe Llogaridhënies së Partive Politike Pjesëmarrëse në Zgjedhjet e Përgjithshme në Shqipëri”, Soros, NED, Tiranë 2009, f.58.

the ruling party and prime minister and chairman of the Democratic Party, Sali Berisha. PS and its leader Edi Rama, generally come in a positive light. While Sali Berisha has more space than Edi Rama, the latter is quoted more. LSI received only 3% of total space and its leader Ilir Meta has 20 times less space compared to Sali Berisha, and 10 times less than Edi Rama¹⁵.

Figure 6. Presentation of political parties by Shekulli before, during and after the electoral compaign for parliamentary elections of 2009



But despite having deviated report in favor of business interests many of the newspapers financed by businesses in Albania are not punished by the reader. But even if theyr were punished, this fact does not affect their perspective of publication.

Ramadan Cipuri says that the reason that such media are not punished by the market is that there they are created to behave in a real market in order to protect owner's interests. "For years it was expected that 'infant mortality' among newspapers was high, but this has not happened because the newspapers did not work according to the laws of the market. In most cases, the owners have created

¹⁵ po aty, f.60

newspapers to be used as a shield or weapon to protect or further the businesses that have, "says Cipuri¹⁶.

The division of print media with the owners although it is not widely appearing it is very high within the consciousness of journalists. Talking about some of the indicators of the crisis of media today, Mustafa Nano says that the typology of patrons of newspapers and television is an important indicator. "We all know who they are, how they have accumulated the money, what links with politicians they have, what interests they defend with the media they have, and in these circumstances, only an idiot could talk about free mass media in Albania. We do not have free media. We have free media owners".¹⁷

7. Media owners, insist on their presence in newspapers: But media owners think differently. They do not care about newspapers as a product with specific qualities to the public, which can not meet their private interests. Often they have justified their intervention in media because journalists build personal agenda in view of their interests or as Koco Kokedhima, owner of *Shekulli*, said, "to make a lump to someone". "We want to encourage internal competition for journalists to have more hardworking journalists, wise and not parasites who sit in the cafés of 'block area' gossiping for hours and wondering how to make a lump to someone. I can not teach journalists reporting techniques, but can motivate integrity and high standards of reporting, "says Kokëdhima¹⁸. By the end of 2011 he placed himself at the head of *Shekulli* as editor surprising many, not because it was not already known as the leading man of the newspaper.

¹⁶ Ramadan Cipuri "Sfida e shtypit të shkruar përballë medias elektronike" Komunikimi i integruar, koncepte, strategji, praktika, Studime albanologjike, FHF, Tiranë 2011, f.29.

¹⁷ Mustafa Nano "Media e lirë në Shqipëri? Është një gjë e pamundur" Gazeta Shqip, Tiranë, 3 maj 2012

¹⁸ Ardian Thano "Kokëdhima: PS dhe LSI fitojnë zgjedhjet e 2013-s" Shekulli, Tiranë, 2 qershor 2012

Psychology of "my newspaper" does not differ much from one owner to another. Another newspaper owner (*Mapo*) who was its director until the end of 2012, Henry Cili, who, unlike Kokëdhima, worked for many years as a journalist, is even more confident in the role of publishers as progressive in contrary to all the critics of mainstream financier role in violating freedom of print media, journalists' integrity and accuracy of reporting. "Unlike people who defend freedom of press and market, print publishers are now major contributors to the development of thought, which may be the only influence in its written form. These are the main contributors to the culture of conceptual debate, unlike the virtual debate, which fled and does not remain because "scripta manent", says Cili¹⁹.

Conclusions:

Albanian media crisis that comes due to property issues is typical for Albania in some of its appearances. We do not face the crisis that has gripped the press almost all over Europe in circumstances similar to those of Albania where business which feeds the media may, at the same time, be its road towards death.

Print media owners do not earn with these media in most cases, or earn very little in rare cases. Almost all the time they lose, but keep the media even though the balance is negative. Profit for industry is provided through exercising political influence through the newspapers, to government, public administration, etc.

Media sponsors do not make transparent ways of funding the media, and with what money they do so.

Media owners have continuous contacts with leaders and their media reporters. During a survey conducted with reporters of the largest newspapers in the country, about half of them said they had close relationships or contacts with media owners and these contacts influence, or are related to, the news. Pressure on news content by the owners has encouraged censorship and self-censorship and a high

¹⁹ Henri Cili "Pse i bashkohemi Panoramës dhe Shekullit me çmimin e ri të gazetës" *Mapo*, Tiranë, 2 qershor 2012

mobility of journalists, from a newspaper to another, in an effort to provide better professional and social status.

Businesses control the editorial policy of newspapers they fund. They provide this status through corruption of professional ethics. When buying integrity does not work for newspaper executives, then they are dismissed and forced to leave the newspaper. For some time such a practice is used where publishers dismiss experienced executives who have high salaries and replaced them with new directors, inexperienced and with much lower wages.

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