

The impact of Public Relations in media during election campaigns

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Abstract

The increase and strengthening of the public relations (PR) industry has directly impacted media content. Nowadays, in Albanian media it is almost impossible to find TV programs – talk shows, news, newspapers, magazines and the like – in which public relations are not present. The main reason is that media and public relations are considerably correlated. It should be noticed that the presence of public relations in media is higher during the election campaigns because political parties and politicians try all they can to influence the editorial line of the newscasts in order to meet their political goals.

This article aims to show how public relations impact media content, especially during election campaigns. The research questions that this study poses are: how public relations impact quality of information communicated to the media? What is the role of public relations in the so-called “agenda-setting” theory of media? Does the media financial crisis affect journalism- public relations relationships and, if that is the case, in what way? In conducting this research, we have relied on empirical data, which include interviews conducted with stakeholders in the media industry, such as journalists, editors, as well as previous research in this field.

Key terms: *public relations, election campaigns, media content*

Introduction

The election campaign can be viewed as a “golden time” when it comes to Public Relations (PR) in the media. Day in, day out the newscasts, television programs, talk shows, newspapers, and magazines supply the audience with PR materials, in which more

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often than not the protagonists are the country's political figures. In theory, media and PR cannot do without one another, since, on the one hand, media is the best outlet to disseminate the information prepared by PR specialists, and, on the other, PR materials are, as it were, the daily "food" for the media; the media can rely on these materials being always available and free. We are today witnessing the Americanization of the election campaigns, a process which, according to Blendi Kajsiu, is a by-product of the Americanization of our political system as a whole. "At the heart of this transformation are two interrelated processes: the decreasing importance of the political parties as institutions of representation, career, and policymaking, on the one hand, and the ever-growing role and political impact of the media and the businesses that support them."¹ Furthermore, the Americanization of politics is a pervasive phenomenon in both Western and Eastern Europe.² That is the reason why election campaigns in Albania are increasingly using techniques borrowed from marketing campaigns. We are, in fact, moving in the direction of *permanent campaigns*, where the beginning and the end of the campaign is not clear; the modern permanent campaign often begins as soon as the last elections are over and it also includes the way the elected officials perform during their term in office. The emergence of the permanent campaign is due to a number of structural factors and transformations, one of the most distinguishing one being the wide spread of technology and the new media. In modern politics, media spend a lot of time covering the political agenda of the candidates and their campaigns, the campaign debates, and the activities of the political parties, largely focusing on the contests between the various candidates: who's winning, who's losing, which candidates are neck and neck, the opinion polls, the campaign strategies and the candidate's image. The media coverage of

¹ Blendi Kajsiu, *Amerikanizimi i politikës ose rreziku i politikës mediatike*; POLIS, Media & Politika; UETPRESS, 2009.

² Lance W Bennet and Robert M. Entman (eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*; Cambridge University Press: 2001. Cited in *Amerikanizimi i politikës ose rreziku i politikës mediatike*, Tiranë: POLIS, 2009.

the campaign has turned into an ongoing race, considering that the political parties and their candidates begin their campaign well before the official opening of the campaign. If we refer to the 2015 (ongoing) local elections in Albania it would be hard to pinpoint the beginning of the campaign considering that news items covering the activity of the political parties and the candidates have been appearing in the media for months now.

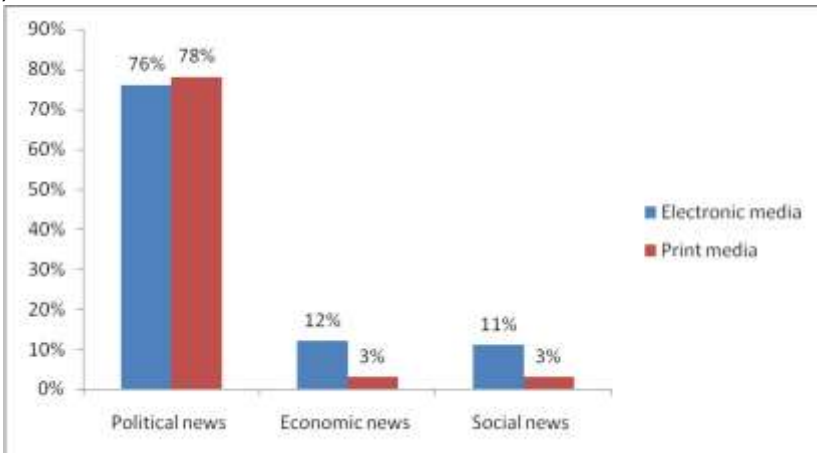
The election campaign is an unceasing activity, continuing 24/7, especially after the emergence of the cable television industry. Unlike the traditional television channels, the all-news television format (such Albanian television stations as *News 24*, *Ora News*, *Top News*, etc.) allows for more news broadcast time, broadcasting the political activities of the candidates 24 hours a day or even re-broadcasting various versions of the same news story that has been broadcasted earlier. In this context the political parties take advantage of the fact that the media need to broadcast live the activities of the political parties; this means that there is 0% journalism and 100% PR. In order to efficiently utilize the broadcasting time, the screen of these television stations is often split in two, thereby enabling these stations to broadcast in real time the activities of the political parties that happen simultaneously. Often these attempts at trying to cover as many news stories as possible serve only to disorient the audiences. According to professor Artan Fuga, the politicization of the information that is delivered to the audiences by the printed and broadcasting media is a result – among other things – of the managerial policies that the media are forced to implement because of the difficult financial position they find themselves in. Under these conditions, the media fail to give due coverage to various fields of social life whose coverage would require a high cost; local news is also underrepresented and investigative journalism has considerably shrunk.³

³ Artan Fuga, *Media në demokratizim*, Tiranë: PAPIRUS, 2014.

PR in the media during electoral campaigns (case study – Albanian 2013 general elections)

The Americanization of the electoral campaigns (this term is used to refer to the mediatization of politics) and the rise of the permanent campaigns have contributed to the ever increasing presence of PR in the media, especially during election campaigns. A report⁴ on the influence of PR in the media content concluded that 80% of the news stories in the newspapers and television channels that were part of this study (newspapers *Panorama*, *Shekulli*, *Shqip*, television channels TVSH, Tv Klan, Top Channel) are based on PR activities. In terms of the influence of PR in the various sectors covered by the news (politics, economy and social topics), the presence of PR in the news stories covering politics was higher than in those news stories covering economic or social topics. (See Graph 1)

Graph 1: How PR presence is distributed in the various sectors of the print and electronic media



According to the news editor-in-chief of *Top Channel* (television channel), Mentor Kikia, the ascendancy of political news over all other

⁴ "The influence of PR in media content", Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Tirana, FHF, with the support of OSCE presence in Albania, 2013 (Report).

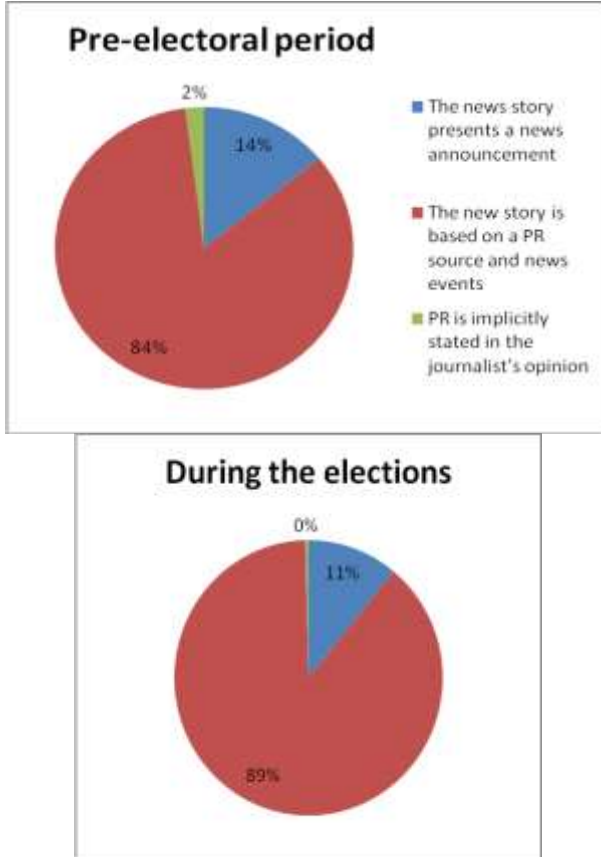
news items and, consequently, the greater presence that PR has in this sector of the news, is related to the low cost this category of news stories have and the fact that producing these news stories requires fewer efforts. Kikia asserts that as much as 70% of all news items are made up of political news. A political declaration, a press conference, or any other political event, constitutes a news item; they are self-explanatory and there is no need for further and deeper journalistic investigation in order for this news items to be understood by the audiences. On the other hand, Kikia adds that the main television newscast is generally viewed as a policy-making newscast, which explains why the media give more importance to political news. This contributes in the "agenda-setting" nature of media. Similarly, Brian McNair emphasizes that "they [the media] order and structure political reality, allotting events greater or lesser significance according to their presence or absence on the media agenda."⁵

In the political news sector, it is the political parties and politicians that try at all costs to influence the editorial line of the media channels and other outlets in order to achieve their objectives. "PR is certainly present [in political news stories], since politics, more than any other sector, imposes its own agenda on media. As a result, you have to follow their [the politicians'] agenda and, consequently, rely on news coming from press offices. If in other sectors you have the luxury to choose the topics, in the political sector, it is the politicians and their press offices that determine the agenda."⁶ PR in the media is even more visible during election campaigns. An analysis (shown in graph 2) of the news stories published in print media during the pre-electoral period shows that 84% of these stories were based on PR sources and this percentage rose to 89% during the election campaign.

Graph 2: The presence of various types of PR-based news before and during the electoral campaign (print media)

⁵ Brian McNair, *Hyrje në komunikimin politik*, Tiranë: UET-Press, 2009, 61

⁶ Interview with journalist Fatjona Mejdini, *Gazeta Shqip*, politics column, June 2013.

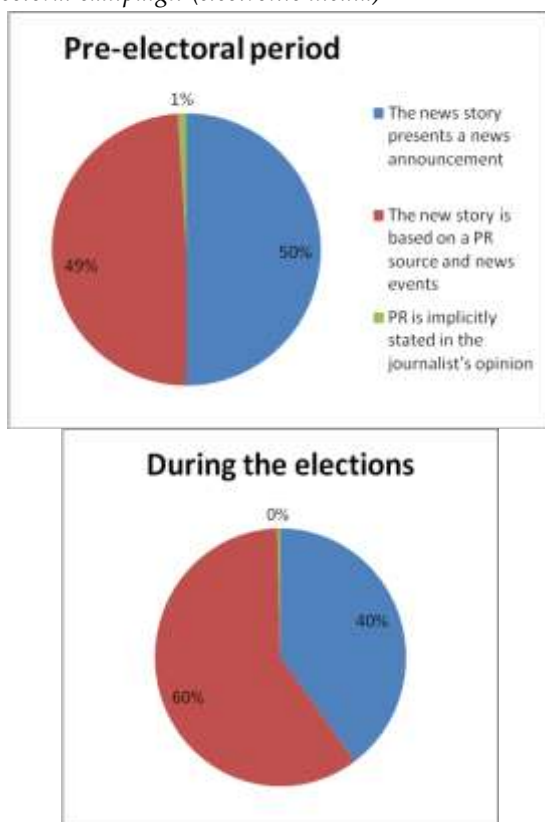


The situation is the same for the electronic media. Thus, during the pre-electoral period the news stories that are based on PR sources constitute 49% of all news stories, while during the election campaign, there is an increase in the PR-based news stories, reaching 60% (See graph 3).

Nowadays, our (Albanian) media is full of political scandals, full of controversy and debate and this may lead us to believe that our journalism is thriving. If you, however, scratch the surface of this media "noise", you will then find out that the number of the political scandals or the number of accusations directed towards one political party or another is, in fact, equal to the number of those politicians that have produced these appealing topics. The politicians supply the

media with these ready-made news stories, thus leading the journalists to self-deceivingly believe that they are really doing their job and that there is no need to investigate further; the journalists are nothing but worthless and cheap hirelings of the politics of the day.⁷

Graph 3: The presence of various types of PR-based news before and during the electoral campaign (electronic media)



As regards the duration of political news in electronic media before and during the election campaigns, the only television channel in which there is a slight increase of the political news during the election campaign (see Graph 4) is the *Albanian Public Television (TVSH)*. The great influence PR has on newscasts is viewed as a

⁷ Kim Mehmeti, "Gazetari politikanësh", in *Mediat shqiptare në tranzicion*, Tiranë: Studime albanologjike-Gazetari dhe Shkenca komunikimi, 2010/3.

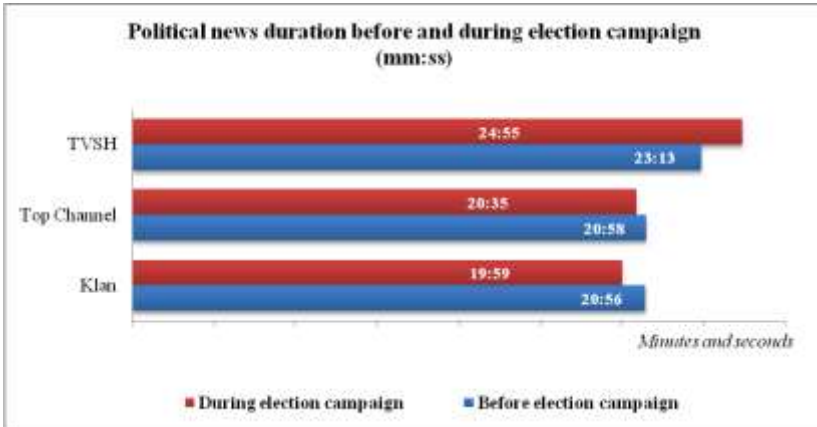
serious threat by the media personalities. "From producers of news, the television channels are turning into broadcasters of pre-fabricated television productions that have been already prepared in the party headquarters or other institutions [...] television journalism is today under serious threat from the ready-made news items that have been manufactured in the party headquarters and from 'spot' journalism."⁸

Among those factors that have contributed to the increasing impact that PR has on media are also the financial crisis of media industry and the reduction of advertisement in traditional media (mainly in the print press). A reduction in the number of the journalists in the newsroom has led to a greater dependence on PR sources. That is the reason that the terms 'spot journalism' or 'PR journalism' is now more frequently and indiscriminately used to describe journalism in general. As a consequence the media content has become uniform – the same news items and the same news sources in every television channel or newspaper. The sole distinguishing factor among the various newscasts and news editions is the journalist's professionalism and expertise, even though, it should be added here that journalists will have to adapt to the editorial line. The traditional press conferences have been replaced by monologues that members of Parliament or different spokespeople deliver in the absence of journalists. Oftentimes, in order to comply with the political balances established by the political establishment, media have to broadcast or publish political declarations even though they know that these declarations may not be true.⁹

Graph 4: Duration of political news before and during the election campaign

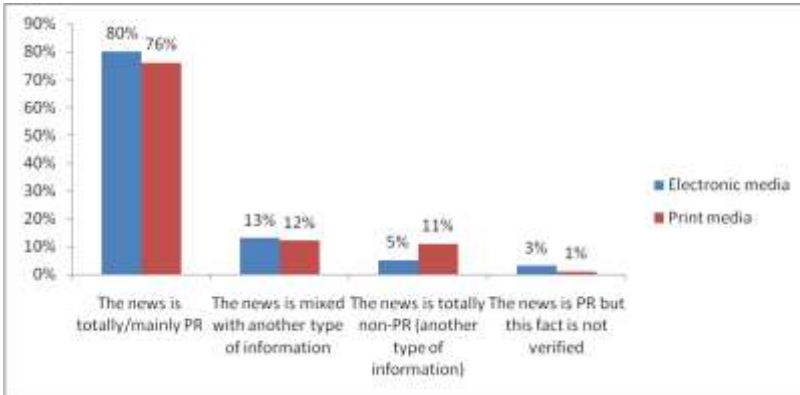
⁸ Mentor Kikia, "Top Channel-Revolucionarizimi i medias dhe pushteti i lajmit", *Historia e medias dhe mediatizimi i historisë*, Tiranë: Studime Albanologjike, 2012, 485.

⁹ *Ibid*, 485.



Another interesting observation is related to the fact that the presence of PR in electronic media is greater than in print media (see Graph 5). This is a result of the television still having the monopoly on information, even though there is an increasing trend of people getting information from other media. Another characteristic that is especially observed during election campaigns is the growth of news items that have only one source. The source of political news is often the politicians' own postings on social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter. The Americanization of election campaigns prompts the politicians to try at all costs to be always present in the media, even though they might have nothing to say to the voters.

Graph 5: The presence of PR in print and electronic media



The enormous impact that PR has on media content shows that Albanian journalism – and media in general – are far from accomplishing their mission. We need, in this respect, only refer to the definition of journalism given by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, who assert that “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”¹⁰

Conclusions

The Americanization of election campaigns in Albania and the implementation of the permanent campaigns have contributed in the increasing dependence that the media have on PR sources. The impact of PR in media is especially visible during election campaigns. As a consequence the media content has become uniform. The political news stories, which occupy most of media space compared to news from other sectors (around 70%), manifest a greater level of PR. The media industry personalities ascribe this high level of PR to the so-called ‘agenda-setting’ nature of media. On the other hand, the politicization of the information that is directed to audiences by both the print and broadcast media also relates to managerial policies that the media outlets are forced to implement to cope with the financial

¹⁰ Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel, *The elements of Journalism*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007, 5.

difficulties they encounter. Under these conditions, the media fail to give due coverage to various fields of social life whose coverage would require a high cost; local news is also underrepresented and investigative journalism has considerably shrunk.

Among the factors that have contributed to the increasing impact that PR has on media are also the financial crisis of media industry and the reduction of advertisement in traditional media (mainly in the print press). A reduction in the number of the journalists in the newsroom has led to a greater dependence on PR sources. Even though the interaction between PR and journalism is unavoidable, the growth and strengthening of the PR industry presents a serious challenge and threat for journalism. Media today offers more information but less quality, although it should be added that this is a worldwide trend and is not only confined to Albania.

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