

Albanian online media and functioning models

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Abstract

The creation of the first information portals in Albania has a relatively short history that goes a little further than a decade. Online media are currently an undeniable reality, and along with the positive innovations that they have brought to the media market or media industry in Albania, they have been accompanied with some problems. The nature of these information portals in itself or of different journalist blogs, which rush towards the last minute news, prompted by the big competition on the web have a somewhat difficult rapport with the reliability of the information that they publish. Often times the audience is suspicious of the veracity of the information and it is expected that they read the same news on many different websites to make sure that it is true.

The online media, as the whole media market, needs financial revenues in order to survive and continue the activity. But how much do these portals guarantee revenues, what are their relations with advertisers and how much their behavior has changed in delivering advertising budgets?

On the other hand, these new media have also created an additional market for the journalists or new reporters, who now form an important community. Even though some years ago being a journalist was only connected to the job in a television, newspaper or radio, we now have a large number of reporters engaged full time or part time only in online media. The need to study related to the status of these journalists employed in these portals arises from this new reality. How are they treated financially, does their professional engagement change because they are only employed in an online media, how does their status change related to the source of information compared to the colleagues in traditional media?

This study aims exactly at finding answers related to the questions arising towards the models of functioning of the online media in Albania, their rapport with reliability and the status of the journalists employed in these media.

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The information portals that will be studied in order to realize this work are balkanweb.com, albeu.com, gazetastart.com, noa.al dhe panorama.com.al

Key words: *albanian media, online media, portals, media market, journalist status, functioning models*

The use of internet in Albania

Albania is one of those countries where the internet usage has seen a rapid rise in the last decade. From an isolated country where the connection to the outside world was almost a forbidden apple, the Albanians are probably passing the stages of the digital revolution faster than the developed western societies. The use of broadband internet in Albania started to be used massively after the privatization of the main fix telephony operator, Albtelecom, in 2007. Even though the birth of the first ISPs dates a lot earlier, in the years between 1996 and 2007 the internet service was offered at very high costs, which led to many consumers being unable to use it. In 2000 an internet package with a speed of 64 kbps offered by Albtelecom costed 400 dollars per month, and the installation alone had a cost of around 500 dollars.¹ In 2008 Albtelecom had around 1200 internet subscribers and in the meantime the family subscribers did not exceed 2500. However, the coming years marked a very high rhythm of internet penetration in the Albanian market. In a short period from 2008 to 2011 Albtelecom reached 70000 ADSL subscribers, which shows the very high rhythms of the spread of the internet in the country². In our country, there are more than 207 thousand broadband internet users and this number is expected to grow even more in the future.³ According to the latest ITU report, which also publishes a ranking of countries according to the IDI coefficient (ICT Development Index), a coefficient that calculates many indicators such as number of computers, number of cell phones,

¹ Zguri, Rrapo. *Mediat online në Shqipëri*. Tiranë: Instituti Shqiptar i Medias, 2014, f.10.

² Tartari, Alban, intervista nga Erlis Çela. Drejtor i Marrëdhënieve me Publikun në Albtelecom&Eaglemobile (20 Prill 2015).

³ AKEP. *Raporti vjetori i veprimtarisë për vitin 2014. Raport vjetor*, Tiranë: Autoriteti i Komunikimeve Elektronike dhe Postare, 2014, f.37.

spread of internet etc., Albania is in 84th place, ranking as the lowest among the other countries in the region.⁴

Transformation through online media

The increasing number of internet users in the country is an important factor in order to understand the level of informing the audience through online media. From the birth of the first information portal in Albanian, BalkanWeb in February 2000, until today the number of original information websites has increased considerably. One of the most meaningful results of the web based media 2.0, accepted by the people who study the new media, is the spread of the “participatory culture” in a media that is based on the logic of the contribution from users and information consumers.⁵

Scholar Mark Cooper brings up two deep effects of the numerical revolution in the commercial mass media; The mediating role that commercial enterprises play in the creation of an audience to be sold to the advertiser is interrupted because the production and spread of content in the form of physical goods (newspapers, books, music CDs, television channels), is an expensive way of creating an audience. The internet makes it possible to create audience in a considerably less costly way. As a result the cost of the advertisers is also reduced. Another very important effect is related to the cost of production, which has dropped dramatically thanks to the internet and technology possibilities.⁶

Even though the terminology of the study in the field of digital media is still being developed, it is important to point out that in the case of information portals on internet we have two main categories. The digital media scholar, Rrapo Zguri, divides them in traditional

⁴ ITU. *Measuring the Information Society Report. Annual Report, Geneva Switzerland*; International Telecommunication Union, 2014, f.42.

⁵ Lewis, Seth C. «THE TENSION BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL CONTROL AND OPEN PARTICIPATION.» *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:6, 2012: 836-866, f.843.

⁶ Cooper, Mark. «*The Future of Journalism; Addressing Pervasive Market Failure with Public Policy.*» Në *The collapse of journalism and what can be done to fix it*, nga V. Pickard R. McChesney, 320-339. New York: The News Press, 2011.

media websites (print, radio, TV), and in individual websites, also known as “digital native media”, which are original web creations that are not related to any traditional media.⁷ Along with these two categories, we also have individual initiatives that come in the form of news portals or online blogs.

Information Technology has made it possible that any individual can offer information by building a simple blog, and in some cases with a ready-made format. The blogs are used by professional journalists as well as citizens who do not have any professional education or training in journalism. The professional journalists have the possibility to use the blogs as a way of escaping from the rigid forms of reporting that are often used in social media. The reporters that for various reasons, including pressure from the owners, politics or other causes, are not able to make news of the gathered information, have a second opportunity to offer these news to the audience through their blogs. Blogs are different from news websites in their writing style as well as their priorities in posting the latest, not the most important as decided by editors. In the case of blogs the journalist is not obliged to respect any rigid hierarchies as in the case of a structured newsroom.⁸

Despite the impact of the new media, and mainly the online media in the democratization of public communication in all its aspects, they are not a solution for democracy. They may be attributed with big merits because they have increased the autonomy, interactivity and fragmentation as occurrences that make it necessary to reconcept the discussion on audiences.⁹ Considering that the audience is the greatest asset of online media, the approach toward their request needs to be revised with priority. These media have a significant problem related

⁷ Zguri, Rrapo. *Mediat online në Shqipëri*. Tiranë: Instituri Shqiptar i Medias, 2014, f.13.

⁸ Thorsen, Einar. «*Live Blogging and Social Media Curation: Challenges and Opportunities for Journalism.*» *Journalism: New Challenges*, 2013: 123-126, f.124.

⁹ Marku, Mark. «*Dinamika e Zhvillimit të audiencës së mediave bashkëkohore shqiptare.*» *Në Media në demokratizim*, nga Bashkim Gjergji, Gentiana Skura, Iris Luarasi, Jonila Godole, Mark Marku Artan Fuga, 11-32. Tirana: Papirus, 2014, f.18.

to the high level of information that circulates and the spread of this information. An individual that requires to be informed through online media may follow only some of them, having it impossible to access all of the information that circulates on the net. On the other side the development of numerical media has not come parallelly with the professional advancement of journalists and reporters. The tendency to do journalism without journalists is challenging as well as dangerous to the quality of informing audiences. The information on the net is in danger of turning into "clan" information because active individuals or sources of information often times have the problem of anonymity and close personal interests, or interests of the group that they represent.

The journalist, being in the classical media or online ones, has an indispensable role because he serves as a professional that critically analyzes the information and is not just a technology user. He selects, relates, criticizes, and analyzes by never becoming just an actor that presents gross information.¹⁰ The indicators show that online media is not giving importance to this kind of professional journalism, which would increase the quality of information.

Online media in Albania, models of functioning

The fact that it is difficult to speak of stories divided in stages is accepted in media, as academic Artan Fuga mentions. According to him, in old media, the classical ones do not leave their places for the new ones, but opens a new place for them by creating a synthesis between classical technologies and contemporary ones.¹¹ From this point of view, the discussion on a completely new model of functioning of online media in our country would be methodically difficult. The first reason is that the features of models of functioning that are encountered in classical media can be also seen in online media in similar or close forms. If classical media has a revenue model based mainly on financings from advertisements, the same model is

¹⁰ Fuga, Artan. *Komunikimi në shoqërinë masive*. Tiranë: Papyrus, 2013, f.572.

¹¹ Doyle, Gillian. *Ekonomia e Medias*. Tirana: Papyrus, 2013, f.48.

seen in the online media as well. The second reason is that the process of the news has great similarities with the classical media. Nevertheless, the fact that we cannot have a “clear” model of functioning which shows the functioning of online media in our country, does not imply that we should not create a new main line through which we can build the basis of a model of well-functioning for these mediums. Technology is at the heart of media business more than in any other industry and the economic success is related to the ability to adapt and maximally exploit the innovative technology developments.¹² The information portals in the Albanian-speaking area need to rebuild a sustainable model of revenues and this may be the greatest challenge that they face. Continuous innovation, not only technologically, is the future of online media. But before we decide on the model of revenues, the market of online media, the actors involved in them such as journalists, owners, webmasters, analyzers of data etc., should rely on some fundamental principles that would make the innovation non-corrosive for the new media and their audiences. Scholar John Pavlik states that the innovation in the news medium should be led by four principles: Smartness and research, Engagement for freedom of speech, Commitment in searching for the truth; precision in reporting, and Ethics.

Innovation in the news media that produce news, including professional journalists and citizen journalism, is extended along at least four dimensions:

1. *Creation, spread and presentation of quality content.*
2. *Inclusion of public in an interactive news discourse*
3. *Application of new methods of reporting, optimized for the digital age*
4. *Development of strategies for managing and organizing in a digital environment, networked and mobile.*¹³

Most of the journalists that are active today in the online media in Albania, accept the fact that these principles are not a priority for them because survival in the market is more important in the

¹² The same.

¹³ Pavlik, John V. «Innovation and the future of Journalism.» *Digitaj Journalism* V.1, No. 2, 2013: 181-193, f.183.

conditions of a “rule of jungle” where getting one less advertisement means covering one part of the expenses for that month.¹⁴

Albanian online media have not managed to create a sustainable economic model so far. The reasons for this are various. If we would rank some that are mentioned by the leaders of the online media studied in this work, we can say that: the economy with its difficulties, the still very low interest of businesses in online advertising, the lack of special legal regulation of online media, the inability to diversify the channels of revenue, the lack of qualified human resources, are some of the main reasons.¹⁵

The classical model supported by the revenues of advertisements, needs to be expanded and completed with additional channels that will ensure the sustainability of the economic model as a whole. The less dependent the information producers are from a single source of income, the more are the chances of sustainability. The channels that can be added to the model that is based on advertisements are the revenues from secondary extra services that portals may offer to the audience. The revenues from advertisers, e-commerce, sponsors and donators, secondary revenue from utility services, inclusion in global models of “revenue sharing” that are applied by giants such as google, would make what is also called “Multiple Revenue Streams Model”.¹⁶ The mixture of information with other services is one of the most important tendencies of today’s most important media on the planet.¹⁷

As for the revenue from advertisements, the Albanian market resembles the international one where the internet is gaining more and more terrain at the cost of traditional media and especially the printed press. The data show that the percentage of advertisements on

¹⁴ Idaver Sherifi, albeu.com, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Mediat shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (13 April 2015).

¹⁵ Kurani, Edison, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Media shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (20 April 2015).

¹⁶ Franklin, Bob. «The Future of Journalism.» *Digital Journalism*, 2:3, 2014: 254-272, f. 256.

¹⁷ Fuga, Artan. «Mediat shqiptare përballë revolucionit numerik dhe web 2.0.» *Studime Albanologjike, Historia e medias dhe Mediatizimi i hstorisë*, 2012: 159-167, f.167.

the internet has increased considerably and this is a chance for online media. The market of advertisements in the internet category in our country is estimated at around 1 million euro, with a multiple increase compared to a few years ago, even though it is still very low compared to the other developed markets.

The construction of this model would create the opportunity for these media to escape from the practise of “copy paste” which unfortunately is a phenomenon of the online media in Albania.¹⁸

From the ownership point of view we can say that information portals in Albania are divided into three main categories: the ones that are part of big media groups (balkanweb.com, top-channel.tv, panorama.com.al etc.); portals owned by individuals with a background in journalism; and portals owned by individuals out of the media and journalism field.

Despite the tendency of a model of “entrepreneur journalist” according to the definition from Mark Coddington which is divided from institutional media and tries to create spaces in the media market, which has also appeared in the Albanian reality, it is difficult to say that this type of journalist has dominating position at the moment.¹⁹ The Albanian online media are led in many cases by individuals that do not necessarily come from the field of journalism.

The chain of spreading the news from production to the audience; the phenomenon of transmedia.

The lack of the necessary human resources to cover the whole flow of information, the low level of professionalism, the phenomenon of new staff without any experience and the often unreasonable and merciless race for the last minute news, are some of the factors that have put us in front of a “copy paste” occurrence that is often seen in Albanian

¹⁸ Zguri, Rrapo. *Mediat online në Shqipëri*. Tiranë: Instituri Shqiptar i Medias, 2014, f.15.

¹⁹ Caddington, Mark. «The wall becomes a curtain. Revisiting journalism's news-bussines boundary.» Në *Boundaries of Journalism. Professionalism, Practices and Participation*, nga Matt Clarson dhe Seth C. Lewis, 67-82. New York: Routledge, 2015, f.76.

online media.²⁰ The process often goes to extremes, bypassing any known necessary stage of the process of gathering, processing, filtering and publishing of information. The “robotized” journalist, sitting in front of a computer screen and a TV screen stuck on an information channel, gets the news that is transmitted on television and directly uploads it online without putting the slightest efforts to verify it from alternative sources. Later the same news that we have seen on TV is spread unimaginable speed in information portals, which “infect” each-other. Then we see the links of these portals shared on social networks. In the worst case, these shared links serve as a source of information for other traditional media. As a result, we deal with an information that circulates in transformed forms and that is consumed by different audiences, and in some cases they overlap.

Within the rapid changes in the media industry, there are also remodelling of styles, codes, languages, types of media communications, styles of cultural languages, modifications of aesthetical formats of art communication etc. The concept of “transmedia” is a term that solidifies many of these innovative tendencies. It is not crossmedia, nor multimedia, but transmedia, which means that the same content that has been communicated takes other forms and different versions, complementary ones, in different online or offline media.²¹ The concept of transmedia is seen in the Albanian media environment, where certain published content in social media can be found in modified versions on the television, radio or printed press.

On the other side, we see the increasing spread of evaluating the news based on numeric statistical data collected thanks to the opportunities offered by technology in tracing audience behavior towards the online news. Clicks, views, likes and shares are now the most reliable statistics for the leaders of information portals by giving

²⁰ Shkëmbi, Adi, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Mediat shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (18 April 2015).

²¹ . standard.al. 6 Dhjetor 2014. <http://www.standard.al/te-reja-nga-industria-e-medias/> (qasja maj 2, 2015).

priority to an editing process led by the audience; "Audience gatekeeping process"²².

Leaders and journalists that are part of the online media recognize the fact that statistics related to the audience have a special role in setting the priorities of news positioning as well as deciding editorial lines of media where they are engaged. As often is the case, the position of the news in the list of the most read news or the decision of the editor to leave it for a longer time in the most visible part of the website, is dictated by the number of likes, shares or comments that the link posted on facebook has received.²³ The leader of the information portal albeu.com expresses that regardless of the difficulties encountered in determining the truthfulness of the analytical data on clicks, visitors and page views, they remain important data in presenting the advertisers with the situation and opportunities that the portal offers to them.²⁴ Meanwhile the leader of noa.al, Edison Kurani thinks that "clicks and the data generated by google analytics are very important in order to see what the audience is looking forward to reading as well as their reaction to different news".²⁵ The audiences do not only require information; they also require entertainment, satisfaction, participation, communication and sharing with others.²⁶

The status of journalist in online media

Journalists of online media now make a considerable community of people that are engaged with news on the internet/ Based on a study made by Rrapo Zguri, the online media in Albania have on average 5-

²² M.Lee, Angela, Seth C.Lewis, dhe Matthew Powers. «Audience Clik and News Placement: A study of Time- Lagged Influence in Online Journalism.» *Communication Research*, 2014: 505-530, f.507.

²³ Bonollari, Daniela, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Mediat shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (20 April 2015).

²⁴ Idaver Sherifi, albeu.com, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Mediat shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (13 April 2015).

²⁵ Kurani, Edison, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Media shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (20 April 2015).

²⁶ Scherer, Eric. *A na duhen më gazetarët?* Tirana: Papirus, 2012, f.56.

7 journalists.²⁷ From our observations in the portals that were part of this study, we see that the average age of journalists in online media is lower than in the traditional media. New graduates or students in the field of communication, media and journalism often become part of the online media. This category of young reporters often has less requirements financially, considering finding a job in the field of media as a priority. The status of journalist in online media may be treated the same as the status of traditional media journalist. In fact, in order to simplify the problem, we will analyze some elements that are related to the status of online media journalist. First the status of journalist in the case of traditional media as well as in the cases of new media is closely related to the access in the sources of information. The freedom, restrictions and difficulties that a journalist has in the aspect of access to information sources, make an important element of the status of journalist. The analysis in this direction would be easier if it was extended comparatively because this would bring out the differences between the traditional media journalist and the online media journalist.

From the interviews concluded with online media journalists it results out that the majority of them agree with the idea that the online media journalist has more difficulties related to the source of information. They relate this to the element of trust and perception that the information source has for online news portals in general. Saimir Lleshi of gazetastart.com, who has an uninterrupted experience of almost 7 years in an online media says that until some years ago, the press offices of the government institutions did not include the online media journalists in their lists for spreading information. It has been only a few years since the addresses of these journalists were included in the list.²⁸ Meanwhile the Editor in Chief of noa.al brings another argument that illustrates exactly the wrong perception that information sources have towards online portals. According to him, the journalists or leaders of online media spend too

²⁷ Zguri, Rrapo. *Mediat online në Shqipëri*. Tiranë: Instituri Shqiptar i Medias, 2014, f.53.

²⁸ Lleshi, Saimir, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Media shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (23 April 2015).

much energy to convince a politician or a well known public person to give exclusive interviews, compared to a journalist that works in a television.²⁹

Secondly the status of journalist in online media is closely related to his financial treatment. Even though the information about online media salaries and incomes of these medias is very hard to get, discussions with journalists suggest in some cases that they are paid less than their colleagues in printed press, television or radio. The average salary of an online media journalist in Albania, including newly graduated reporters, varies between 25 thousand to 35 thousand lekë per month. This amount is visibly lower than the salaries of the reporters in traditional media. The aspect of financial security has a big effect on determining the status of journalist. Informality is an illness that has touched the whole media market in Albania and this does not leave out the online media journalists either. They face low salaries, are not declared as employees, do not have legal employment contracts etc.

The Head of the Journalists' Union of Albania, Aleksandër Çipa, expresses that this category of journalists is more unprotected in terms of employment contracts.³⁰ Even though, according to him the case of regular employment contracts for journalists is a problem that accompanies the Albanian media for years, the informality in the online media is even greater. "We have noted that most of these journalists are at a very young age, newly graduated or students that are still studying". The administrators in many cases prefer to interrupt the working relations after 2-3 months and hire new people. This is a continuous cycle.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The panorama of online media in Albania, even though it shows a very long list of information portals, websites of traditional media and

²⁹ Kurani, Edison, intervista nga Erlis Cela. *Media shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (20 April 2015).

³⁰ Çipa, Aleksandër, intervista nga Erlis Çela. *Media shqiptare online dhe modelet e funksionimit* (25 April 2015).

different blogs, does not show a quality development based on sustainable models. Online media in Albania continue to struggle for survival by suffering generally from all symptoms of traditional media. The lack of a sustainable management model, as well as following the innovative technology developments without using some important professional principles as a compass for orientation, has brought a chaotic development of the online media in Albania.

The classical model based on only advertisement revenues seems to be insufficient in keeping these media economically standing. This model needs to be extended and completed with additional channels that will facilitate the sustainability of the economic model in general. Revenues from advertisers, e-commerce, sponsors and donors, secondary revenues from utility services, inclusion in the global models of "revenue sharing" as applied by giants such as google, would make for what is known as the "Multiple Revenue Streams Model". On the other side the findings of this study in some of the main online portals in the country show that they are increasingly becoming more dependent on social networks which are turning into a main source of audience.

The study also shows that the community of journalists engaged in the Albanian online media suffers from the lack of consolidation. The opinions of journalists and leaders of online media show that the approach towards the source of information is more difficult compared to traditional media journalists.

This is mainly related with the element of trust and the perception that the news sources have for the online portals of news in general. The problem remains the financial treatment of journalists in these media and their job security. The improvement of the specific legal basis for the online media and the engagement of individuals working in this sector of media in organizations in order to protect their rights can impact the situation.

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