

## *The phenomenology of sub local reporting on the web*

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### *A current problem*

Generally, in theory, it is known that digital audience should be particularly closely interested in information of mass communication. Online News becomes interesting when affects a space as close as possible to individuals who receive it. This does not exclude at all the interest of recipients in the message on international news, but always provided this happens only if it remains closely connected with issues of space closer to a community of people, or target audience.

The arrival of mass media on the Internet, together with the development of social media is associated with the idea that now is the turn of sub local or hyper local news, therefore of information covering areas very close to individuals that make audiences. It is precisely this aspect that we are interested in this treatise. What namely does it mean that the content of news or information dealing with priority issues or topics within a geographical, social, territorial area around individuals that make audiences? So what is the digital news covering the near periphery of the individual or what it is in other word proximity, the micro social news and sub local space when we are talking in the context of mass communication in Internet?

We emphasize this because in the contemporary Western literature we are still in a phase of debates regarding the above, there are interesting concepts, but which seem to have not yet been developed properly, and therefore leave room for comments and other assumptions. Also, because in the mass media in Albania, and Albanian ones, as a rule, often we have a mechanical displacement of the contents of information from one platform to another,

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regardless changes and differences between them, so we have a transfer, often a mechanical one, of the news as it is written in the journal paper straight to the web on line by that newspaper and from there it passes unchanged at social media, thus losing the specifics of each platform.

The new media, Internet, social media on the Internet and the web are treated and used with the mentality of old media and consequently they lack journalism and audiences do not approach.

In other words the basic question stands as follows: Is the "narrow space of reporting" in the mass media in the paper or on the TV screen equal to the "narrow space" in mass communication on the Internet, and if they differ between them, what are the specifics of each given concept?

### ***Empirical local areas and sub-local news: Are they the same thing?***

Rightly, in today's western literature, there are authors who insist that social media, as well as the mass media on the Internet, for many reasons, provide opportunities and possibilities for information covering sub local areas. Reported sub local areas are those areas that are usually covered in a very peripheral way by classic and linear media. It is therefore the capacity of virtual media, civic or professional, social networks or media on the web to be closer to citizens, closer to them in time and space. Especially in the case of the Albanian media that are generally characterized as national generalist media, oriented significantly to the political news, there is room to make a radical transformation since national news prevails and is over reported compared with the news from the world, as well as with the news that touching sub local areas, based on the village, neighborhood, professional collectives, etc.

The news on social networks and new online mass media is likely to touch the narrow areas around the individual since first the web provides the chance for the so called the "long tail", i.e. to present as well information that affects relatively small audiences. This is because space and time on the web are inexhaustible. However, the

attention and time the public devotes to receive information are not endless. This enables even the news covering small areas to survive by avoiding techniques that put the hierarchy of information through the selection and removal of news of lesser interest to wider audiences.

On the other hand, the Internet media, theoretically paved the way to sub local news allowing audiences to communicate interactively with newsrooms. The individual is likely to appear in the Internet space reporting what happens in the moment around him, which is impossible to be covered extensively by professional journalists. Needless to say, the audience that generates content initially is interested to report and share the events taking place nearby.

And here let us not forget that there is a kind of "clan identity" of audiences who follow the media on the Web, while evidence obtained from media tools confirm in years the trend of wide audience to abandon the mass media on paper, TV screen linear broadcasting, etc. It is said that this is explained to a certain extent by the fact that classical media over report information covering national life, while the daily life of real citizens is carried out in spaces ever smaller, nearby. Not to be forgotten, that often information covering small space is also beneficial utility, thus helping citizens in their daily life. Furthermore, it is free and is conducted through a dialogue between individuals that make audiences.

Therefore, theoretically it is justified that the new online media have the opportunity to fill with news this area of the black zone of information such as sub local area, which, in fact, as it is proved by evidence, is under reported by the media of linear content.

So, the French scholar Bernard Poulet, stresses that: "In this fatiguing search of new financial resources, information media throw the anchor to another creed, that of "Sub Local". In Gothenburg, many media owners have presented it as a new Eldorado, as far as referring to "the model of hyper local news." "Life is local," stated Tim Bowdler, general director of Jonson Press, the earliest of the three largest British groups of local and regional newspapers<sup>1</sup>. Although not clearly elaborated in detail, it is understood that in this specification, "the

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Poulet, *La fin des journaux et l'avenir de l'information*, p. 232, Editions Gallimard, 2012.

space near the individual man" is understood as the area where the individual conducts his life and daily activities.

In such trenches stands another researcher in communication strategies on the web, Eric Scherer, also French, which specify further the concept of what is being discussed. Scherer says: "There are thriving hyperlocal sites on the scale of a city, even a neighborhood, which propose a so fine coverage with information like the coverage of a block of houses (EveryBook) or of a city neighborhood (South Boston)<sup>2</sup>. In this statement, "the space near the individual man", "proximity distance", as an object of media information, are understood as a relatively narrow empirical space, thus as a kind of neighborhood, of a community of individuals living in an urban micro social structural level, as a neighborhood or a group of houses.

Based on this, as the space near the individual somehow crumbles the vast empirical social space, and therefore makes it impossible sending journalists in every corner in real time of occurrence of events, it is proposed that this work be carried out by journalists - citizens who volunteer. So American scholar Alex Jones says: "Hyper localization of news by some newspapers, seeks to cover by information everything, and an appropriate and affordable manner would be to mobilize volunteers, journalists - citizens who would do it as best as they could<sup>3</sup>. "It is clear that the American scholar here is connecting the coverage of narrow spaces by news with a result that comes automatically with the expansion of the thematic structure of the story. And then, he is connecting it also with an almost inevitable replacement of professional journalist by citizen journalist.

It is understood that these ideas are important and interesting. But, however, one question remains: Why, at least in the Albanian case and beyond the coverage with information of narrow empiric spaces, has not attracted so much attention of the mass media on the Web, even social media convey rather opinions, or enter into personal debates of group members, which has not any particular social interest?

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Scherer, *A naduhemëgazetarët*, fq. 170, Papirus, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Alex S. Jones, *Losing the news*, p. 191, Universitypress, Oxford, 2009

From my experimental experience I believe that this is precisely result of the conceptual equation of "local empirical space" with "the object of sub local news" which structures the information. The space, the real neighborhood, objective one, and virtual informative neighborhood on the Web, are far from being the same thing, they cannot overlap with each other conceptually.

Technologically online media are able to cover with news even the real empirical space geographically limited, but this is not enough. A lot of difficulties arise immediately.

Initially the coverage of spaces with news informing about very narrow empirical areas reduces the audience, keeping its volume in the circle of family members who live in a neighborhood or cluster housing.

What will be the economic formula for the media on the Web to get through having such a limited audience?

Hence there will be no professional journalists who will do the work, but idle citizens that can be dedicated to their community. However, this is associated with amateurism in providing information. On the other hand, the content of the news also tends to trivialize being closed in many local boundaries, the incomparable with large areas of the world. Audiences crumble as well.

It is understandable that the concept of nature of "sub local" news has to be revised and expanded in a new light.

### **3. Local areas in different media**

However, we cannot be nihilistic and to begin the history from the scratch. The earlier media, before those on line, have been reporting on the local areas as well. The history of the world media shows this, but also the experience of the Albanian media.

In the classic press reporting on empirical sub local areas, namely the territorial areas, narrower than a town or a village, contained small items. It seems of no interest, but, as brought into attention by MacLuhan, there were often those small reports, (who will buy what? Who will sell what? Who was born and who died? Who got married?, etc.). Often all that constituted the core interest of audiences for media on paper.

Also, in what are called controlled media of corporations, as in this case local businesses, such as brochures, press releases, informing letters, etc., there were issues concerning a narrow collective at micro social level.

Meanwhile, in the comments (blogosphere), accompanying the generalistmediabroadcasts on the Web, often the news which cover a national or regional space accompanied by interventions of individuals in the audience, which contain comments and information from their personal experience, from neighboring sub local reality.

While the media on the Web of local character, certainly transmit information on a specific empirical space.

### ***What does practical research show?***

Even in the science of mass communication, the personal experience based on some methodological principles constitutes an experimental context where theoretical knowledge can be tested, even can be applied, modified and enriched, with an understanding of being coherent with reality.

This is what happens also in the case of my personal practice of several years' engagement in social media and communication, mainly through my network site on Facebook, but not only. Its audience has been growing and, depending on the season and themes, also on my volunteer commitments, it currently varies from 40 thousand to 170 thousand viewers per month. Referring to the week preceding the conference, where this paper was held, namely the week 22 to 29 May 2015, there resulted in 57,159 "like" and 6,951 only during that week. There were 32 thousand clicks within a week, 367 "share" within the same interval, 476 comments came from the audience, which at that time consisted of 46% male and 54% female. All these data are brought to show that our experience is based not only on a consistent and long-term communication, but with a steady audience, growing dynamically and not negligible.

I will pick up to quickly review three cases where it is clearly shown also how the "spatial proximity" is understood as a kind of sub local news in some posts that have attracted mass audiences.

**The first case:** The "Poisoned" Coffee. On August 16, 2012 I posted the following note: "How cannot become 'poisoned' the coffee served every morning at the café by a former graduate student of mine in philosophy!" The number of people who have seen it was 10,074; there were 539 "like", 79 comments, the same number of "share". It was a success.

Where it lies in this case the meaning the area reported as a narrow area? The information provided relates to everyday life. The news relates to a common event, like having a coffee in the morning, though the waiter is a young philosopher. The communication of the event as news is made face to face. But there is a big social problem related to unemployment of graduates as a real concern for youth. Any young person, regardless the place where he is located, virtually is surrounded by a dangerous space of unemployment risk, surrounded by the environment that accompanies the eventual household of the unemployed.

**The second case:** "The Cake of Independence". It is known that on November 28, 2012, the people gathered in the square for the celebration of Independence Day rush into the giant cake paved at the colonnades of the Palace of Culture in Tirana and pillaged it with buckets and bags. On this occasion, I posted the following: "Just they come with mud, with bags, bowls, pots in hand, with kettles and spades and it is a natural phenomenon, like Robespierre wrote, therefore having no shame neither fear nor bashfulness. One does not expect to eat cake with a spoon and fork, as Ismail Bey did, while the people followed after, glued to the wheel of his cart, walking in the rain and mud." This post is set into the wall on 1 December 2012. There have been 9412 visits just in a few hours, 651 "like", 132 comments and 237 "share". It was a success regarding the interest of the audience.

What were the characteristics of this post and how helpful it was regarding the intention of communication in covering nearby narrow hyper local areas? The reported incident took place within a relatively small space, the square in front of the Palace of Culture in Tirana. The event appears as banal, eating cake, but the fact that thousands of people rushed during a national official ceremony, the 100th anniversary of Independence, to the super cake as greedy, this was a

very special news. The echo was too broad, because in addition to traditional media, social networks of Albanians everywhere in the world followed it with a density of comments.

Why is it so? First, it is because in the virtual world the actual distances are not always of crucial importance. An Australian, for example, may be interested little or nothing about what happens during a holiday in Albania, but an Albanian immigrant in Melbourne cares more despite the fact that the distance between him and Tirana, in kilometers is equal to the distance between an Australian who is in Melbourne away from Tirana. The geographical proximity of the audience and the news is not simply an empirical and objective distance, but a distance psychologically recognized, phenomenological, therefore it depends on the feeling of being far away or close to the reported incident. If the interest of audiences for news is increased, the distances that separate them from the event have the tendency to decrease in phenomenological plan, as a psychologically recognized distance.

The distance takes a phenomenological nature, especially in the virtual world of the Web, because there, within the virtual world, proximity is important conceptually, emotionally and spiritually, while the physical proximity between individuals or between the individual and a country where the event takes place primarily is not important. No matter how far are empirically two individuals in the physical world, virtually on the web, they are just one click far from one another.

The issue of the cake, among other things, related primarily to the identity of an Albanian in his immediate surrounding environment. Not in vain, when treated this issue, in Albanian social networks around the world, prevailed the word "shame", which meant that they were aware a great deal from this event because of their high emotional responsiveness in relationship with the world around them, with their close surrounding environment, with their structured short distance space in terms of their relationships with social microcosm where they live.

*The third case:* "Tirana like a big latrine" On 12 May 2015, while in Albania developed the campaign for the local elections, I wanted to



draw the attention of the Tirana publicat the seriousness of problemscollected in their city, in front of the superficial nature of the electoral debate of candidates for mayor. The title of the posting was shocking, because it used a word not very pleasant. "We live in a huge latrine, sorry for my expression in Tirana jargon, Tirana is a great dump where we live, sleep, defecate, we draft laws, organize fairs, "open"election campaign to elect the Mayorof our common latrine."This post was opened by 42 144 persons since the early hours of the publication, 1076 "likes", 92 comments, 160 'share'.It was a huge traffic.

Here as well, the reporting with relevant commentary orientated toward narrow areas close to the individual. This is so even when we talk about Tirana. Certainlythe proximity of the reportedobjectwith audiences is not enough to obtain a successful news and commentary. The comment should come at the right time, and thus have an actual sense. There should be an adopted language and a specific style in social networks. But, however it is important that it be referred to the close micro spaces. The word "latrine" is part of a sub local dictionary because itis part of a sub dialect language. So rather than symbolically, inclusion of the city in a "latrine" puts it closely in an environment of relatively small size. Likewise, the word "our" as a possessive pronoun for Tirana, creates a sense of community that evokes close ties between the inhabitants of the city. Moreover, despite the fact that being "dirty" transcends the environment close to a neighborhood or apartment blocks and captures a wide area, an environment unclean beyond the door of the apartment, surrounding every individual in theneighboring areas, therefore, it is an environment that belongs to the individual micro-social area, so we have to with a sub local space.

### ***What are and what are not sub local spaces, i.e.of narrow dimensions?***

Proceeding from my experience of several years, from which I brought only three illustrative examples, one may ask what is the

meaning of "sub local reporting" or "micro social space" covered by reporting, which is made possible by the media on the Web?

a. Is this "sub local space" determined by the size of the territorial area where lies the audience interested? No. The audience may be located in a restricted area, but can also be found in a much wider region or continent or across our planet. The distance of the audience from the event that is reported or commented is not an objective and fatal factor. It is always defined by understanding, interest, willingness, recognition of the audience compared to the event reported. Moreover, the virtual neighborhood is rather that of shared common concern what makes that even people far apart, who objectively live in countries that are far from each other, be part of the same group of audiences, feeling very close to each other

b. Is the kind of 'sub local spaces' reported or covered with comments determined by a greater or smaller distance among individuals who comprise the audience that consumes such information or such comments? No. It is determined by what was mentioned above.

c. Is the nature of 'sub local news' determined by relatively small distances between news reporters or commentators and audiences receiving their messages? No. These distances can be large or short, this does not matter, because, we emphasize once again, in the world of Internet real distances are relative as long as it comes to "virtual spaces of communication."

d. Is the nature "sub local reporting space" determined by distances and the size of the area of the territory where the event takes place? Examples and experience tell us: No. The event could happen in a town square, or in a café, or may involve the whole city, but this does not necessarily alter the near nature and small distances that make the reporting spaces.

e. Is the nature of "sub local" news coverage and commentary determined by the nature of close, relatively small, concise of the area that surrounds the individual that is by the nature of the micro-environment in which the individual lives and receives the news or comment? Yes. This is almost necessary in every case.

## ***Conclusion***

Sub local space in the media reporting on the Web is all the space near the individual man or near or around the relatively small or broader social group covered by the news. It is precisely there that man realizes his everyday life.

The sub local space of the news is determined by the nature of the problem and not by narrow spaces close to its territory. Micro social and micro territorial and are not the same. A micro social occurrence can be extended over a very wide area, as well as an event can occur in a narrow area having no micro social but macro social character by its own weight on the society at large.

As such the sub local news is not supposed to be conclusive and limited to within a very small audience as it happens that lives within a block of houses or within a narrow neighborhood. It is exactly this nature of "the universality of a specificity or individuality" that gives to the sub local information the nature of a massive nature of information making very broad audiences be interested. Sub local space of the news on the Web, especially today in terms of open societies and high indexes of emigration, is not simply and only a relatively narrow physical territory covered with information.

The qualitative sub local news with wide audience is not determined neither by the fact that it may be an unusual event or an ordinary routine one. The reported event may be a random action (have a coffee in the morning), an event that constitutes a scandal (eat cake with buckets), or maybe a news already known by everybody (Tirana is a dirty city). The success of sub local news depends largely on attention it attracts by reporting on social narrow spaces that surround the individual in a neighborhood, a block of flats, a village, or wherever it is located across the globe. So, the whole mastery in the systems of information precisely distinguished what is the thematic similarity of a local problem, structured in a relatively narrow space around the individual, with problems surrounding other individuals in contexts spread geographically.

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### **Keywords:**

- Phenomenology distance
- Virtual sub local space
- Sub local news
- Virtual proximity
- Sub local reporting space