

NEW MEDIA, ITS IMPACT ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ALBANIA: WIKILEAKS

CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Scientific study aims to find the impact of new media on political communication in Albania and to make a substantive analysis of this communication. The focus of the study is WikiLeaks a non-profit organization which publishes secret information; its directly impact on political debate, giving the media in this way not only a reflective role of reality but also a constructive role. Main hypothesis of the study: it has been found that WikiLeaks had an impact on political communication in our country, although it is not confirmed yet the validation of the data distributed by this new media. Other important topics are: How ethical is the publication of the cables from the Albanian media and what kind of political communication has produced WikiLeaks. The perspective will be: media has not only a reflective role but also it constructs society. Methods applied will be: observation, analysis, interviews and processing empiric data. It has been found that the preliminary results of the study are: 1. As a new media in the context of global development WikiLeaks has influenced political communication in Albania opening in this way a new political debate, 2. Even if the discussion is whether it is ethical or not to publish secret information, again we have a political communication based on unproven facts, 3. WikiLeaks as a new media confirms the thesis that the media does not have a passive role, but it constructs social realities. Suggestions in this case: in this new global development media should be evaluated and analyzed in a new perspective.

Keywords: *New media, constructive media, political communication, ethics, WikiLeaks.*

At the beginning of this paper we will state a question quite popular among analysts, journalists, politicians and more: what influence did Wikileaks have in Albanian political life? By elaborating this question we could state its goal more specifically: how much trouble have the publications of Wikileaks caused in the Albanian politics? In order to answer this question we will state the hypothesis that Wikileaks has influenced the Albanian politics. This hypothesis has nothing to do whether the information published on this website is true or not but with the fact that the information published by Wikileaks affected political communication in our country. Where can we base this hypothesis? How can we interpret the available facts? We will bring many arguments on the matter which will be interpreted from the point of view of the hypothesis stated above. One of the main themes running throughout this paper is the concern whether the publication of confidential information, or at least what institutions label as "confidential", is ethical or not.¹

According to Wikipedia, Wikileaks is a self-called nonprofit international organization founded by Julian Assange² which publishes private data of media, secret and classified from anonymous sources. According to their own description, Wikileaks states to be: "... A nonprofit media organization. Our goal is to bring important news and inform the public. We offer a new way, secure and anonymous, for our sources to hand their information to our journalists... One of our most important activities is to publish material from original sources..."³

Is it moral for Wikileaks to publish online secrets and classified documents for the sake of public interest? James and Stuart Rachels specify theoretically the minimal concept of morality in their book "Elements of Moral Philosophy". "Moral is, at very least, the struggle to guide your actions by reason, which means, doing that for which there are the best reasons to do so, considering equal the interests of every individual influenced by your actions"⁴.

Online media, such as Wikileaks, bring to life more ethical problems due to their nature as "open doors technology", or as Rrapo Zguro states: "But the spreading and enormous growth of online media and blogs come with the amplification of ethical problems. One of the properties stimulating this the most is the diversity and spreading of global internet as well as its own nature as the technology of open doors. It is very simple these days for everyone to make a webpage or online blog and post on it everything they see fit or wish"⁵.

Another author, Devis Baz Merit, explains his worries concerning the orientation in this vast amount of information, and rightly so. "In case this information highway creates an infinite chaos, then how can we orient ourselves in this ocean of information. In what way, middle this gutter with no traces to be found, can one gather the needed amount of information, so important for the public life? Can democracy survive made up prejudices?"⁶ In fact researchers of online journalism have already raised their concerns about the reliability of the information found online. Ricardo Stagliano says that one of the most criticized

¹There is not any confirmation by official institutions if the data published on Wikileaks are true or not

²Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiLeaks>

³Wikileaks: <http://wikileaks.org/About.html>

⁴Rachels, James & Stuart, « Elements of Moral Philosophy», Fifth Edition, Dita 2000, Tirana, 2009, pg.30

⁵Zguro, Rrapo "Ethics in Albanian blogosphere", "Albanian Studies. Journalism and Communication Science. Albanian Media in Transition", University of Tirana, Faculty of History and Filology, Tirana, 2010, pg.133

⁶Merit Baz, Devis, « *Public Journalism and Public Life*», Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, pg.196

themes by online journalism critics is the low level of reliability which the net seems to guarantee.⁷ "Some old crimes, like defamation, were reborn with internet. This begs the question: when defamation takes place online, is it more or less grave compared to when it takes place in the traditional media?"⁸ Stagliano underlines that in this vast amount of information, it is the duty of electronic media to prove their reliability. "Actually in reality in online just as in off-line media, reliability is a permanent, ongoing battle. The difference can be seen in the fact that electronic media, because of its young character, still has to prove itself to the public"⁹. In fact, the more variety there is in information, the more the public can choose and judge. "In a world of cyberspace, where geography and physical differences do not need to be part of it, the common experience clearly shows the exchange of needed information. The more intense this exchange is, the more lively the dialogue is, the more important the information is, the more the community can flourish."¹⁰ Leaving aside the global information network and focusing on that of Albania, I'd like to point out the Ethical Code of Albanian Media. Concerning the "Acquisition and Distribution of information", it clearly states that "Gossips and information from anonymous sources must not be published as news, except when the information is particularly of vital importance for the public. Even in that case it must be clearly stated that the information is unverified".¹¹ Did the media in our country clearly state that this information is unverified or did they just try to bring only the testimony of the actors mentioned in the material published by Wikileaks? In fact, the Ethical Code of Albanian Media legitimizes the publication of material concerning the abuse of political power. "Public interest is defined as follows: << The finding, exposure or prevention of a crime, scandals or political power abuse; ... But, public interest does not justify sensationalism. For the purpose of this Code, information of public interest must not be misunderstood with the information interesting for the public."¹² Another analysis of the ethic platforms of albanian institutions of mass communications comes from Bashkim Gjergji: "...of course there are questions about the ethic platform on which our institutions of mass communications are based. Is there any deontological standard widely accepted? Which are the shortcomings of the media and what does the ethical code really represent?"¹³

How has the media influenced political communications in Albania? And Wikileaks as a new media? At first, let us refer to the two authors who have written on the media and communications: Artan Fuga and Marshall McLuhan. In "Escape from Rozafa's compound", Fuga says that the media have too much influence on society as they fill in an intermediate role between public and politics. "The media influence the electorate, which on its side at certain moments, has made its own political choice. This relationship is not for instance media-trade but rather media-reader(electorate)-political decision-trade. In some way, we can say that the media mediatize politics as well as the politics mediatize the media."¹⁴ In the same publication, Fuga focuses on the contents of the media, their message, symbols and facts. "The contents of the media, their message, symbols, interpretation of facts and events, the representation of reality, the selection of facts, the analysis of different aspects of politics or of any other nature for that matter, the existence or not of a given reality, are as identical across different types of written media, as they are

⁷ Stagliano, Riccardo, « *Journalism 2.0* », Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, 2004, pg.120

⁸ Stagliano, Riccardo, « *Journalism 2.0* », Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, 2004, pg.157

⁹ Stagliano, Riccardo, « *Journalism 2.0* », Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, 2004, pg.121

¹⁰ MeritBaz, Devis, « *Public Journalism and Public Life* », Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, pg.197

¹¹ Ethical Code of Albanian Media, Tirana, Albanian Media Institute, 2006, pg.6

¹² Ethical Code of Albanian Media, Tirana, Albanian Media Institute, 2006, pg.12

¹³ Gjergji, Bashkim, "Missed Autoregulation in Media", *Albanian Studies. Journalism and Communication Science. Albanian Media in Transition*, University of Tirana, Faculty of History and Filology, Tirana, 2010, pg.109

¹⁴ Fuga, Artan, "Escape from Rozafa's compound", Peja, "Dukagjini", 2000, pg.461-462

different in nature, fuzzy, based on the main three logics and typologies of media (radical model, equal opportunity, symbiotic model) and of the three main positions in the spectrum of the media (lets describe them as right, left and center based on how they profile themselves in politics).”¹⁵Fuga elaborates on this intermixture of media and politics in his other book "Goat Horns" when he says that politics is defined by the media: "...this aspect is so marginalized that it even sounds strange when put like that. As many communication experts have said, it is the media, and television in particular, that shape politics in its deepest form and contents. Briefly, it is of high importance for the TV audience, public and electorate, for researches in particular, that it be clear, not only the influence of politics on the information broadcasted by the media and television in particular, but also the vice versa, the influence of television on the contents of the political message and its shape.”¹⁶

On this perspective, Wikileaks has defined politics and political communications because basically, as Marshall McLuhan would say: "The medium is the message"¹⁷. Based on this point of view, considered of high importance in the journalism and communication sciences, the contents being broadcasted by the media is of no importance at all; its existence on itself is the message, contents and idea it wishes to broadcast. "In a culture as ours, accustomed since a long time to the crumbling of everything, as a way of domination, sometimes it sounds shocking hearing that, as long as practical consequences are concerned, the medium is the message itself. In other words, this means that the personal and social consequences of every medium, or technology for that matter, are the result of the new interactions they bring in our lives. Many people tend to believe that the meaning or message of a new technology, isn't in that technology itself, but in the way they use it. But when it comes to the influence they have on us, changing our relationships with others or even with ourselves, it doesn't matter at all whether it produces popcorn or Cadillac's".¹⁸Can we make an analogy between Wikileaks and the electric bulb of McLuhan when he says: "Let's go back to the electric bulb. It doesn't matter at all whether we use it to perform a brain surgery or to watch a baseball game at night. We could speculate that in some way, exactly these events constitute the 'contents' of the electric light, since it cannot exist without them. But in reality, this only confirms the thesis according to which 'the medium is the message', because it is the medium which controls and defines the dimensions and shape of the events and human relations. On the other side, the contents, thus the way a new medium is used, can be very different, but it doesn't exercise any influence on human relations. In fact it happens quite often that the contents of a medium doesn't allow us to understand its characteristics.”¹⁹ Actually, McLuhan warns us to be careful of every medium since "every medium has the power to push their will on those who are not careful".²⁰ The idea of McLuhan that we must focus on the medium, it's existence, because it is the message, is reinforced even more when treating the marginalization of the way the media are used. "The traditional way we normally react to the media, of the importance how they are used, actually resembles the numb stance of the technological idiot ... The effect that has a medium strengthened and intensified simply because it has been

¹⁵ Fuga, Artan, "Escape from Rozafa's compound", Peja, "Dukagjini", 2000, pg. 474-475

¹⁶ Fuga, Artan, "Goat Horns, reading in communication", Tirana, "Ora", 2008, pg.431

¹⁷ McLuhan, Marshall, "Instruments of Communication: media as an extension of the human being", Tirana, Institute of Dialoge and Communication, 2008

¹⁸ McLuhan, Marshall, "Instruments of Communication: media as an extension of the human being", Tirana, Institute of Dialoge and Communication, 2008, pg.13

¹⁹ McLuhan, Marshall, "Instruments of Communication: media as an extension of the human being", Tirana, Institute of Dialoge and Communication, 2008, pg.14-15

²⁰ McLuhan, Marshall, "Instruments of Communication: media as an extension of the human being", Tirana, Institute of Dialoge and Communication, 2008, pg.22

given to that media another medium as "content"²¹In fact wikileaks and its documents fed all other media.

After the discussion concerning moral laws on the publication of confidential material by Wikileaks and the ideas of different authors on the relation between the media and politics, let us go back to the influence of Wikileaks on political communications and more specifically the one in Albania. I will prove the hypothesis I stated at the beginning of this paper, that Wikileaks has influenced politic communications, based on facts and their interpretation.

The 452 leaks which contain "Albania" as keyword and are available for public access, mention numerous albanian politicians as well as a vast variety of situations in the albanian political arena. Among others they mention the Prime Minister Sali Berisha, ex-minister of Interior Affairs Bujar Nishani, minister of Defense Arben Imami, minister of Finance Ridvan Bode, Genc Ruli, ex-minister of Defense Fatmir Mediu, ex-minister of Culture Aldo Bumçi, Genc Polloetj.

On the fourth of September 2011, the albanian media made public confidential leaks, taken by the webpage of Wikileaks, of the United States of America Embassy for the Department of State in which ex-Ambassador John Withers reported on a very confidential meeting he had with the ex-chief of General Staff Luan Hoxha. Hereby a part of the kabllogram: "...In a meeting with the ambassador, Mr. Hoxha told the story behind his dismissal, recently became associated with Gerdec explosion. As opposed to the ex-minister of defense Mediu, who in public speeches blamed army officials for the events of Gerdec, Hoxha declared from the start that ex-minister Mediu made all the decisions, starting from the choice of Gerdec as the place for disassembling the munitions, up to the type of munitions to be disassembled and time schedule. Hoxha accepted that his staff had received orders to transport the munition to that location and defend the area. Hoxha said that when he visited Gerdec in mid-2007, his soldiers were doing just this and there were no apparent irregularities to be found. He denounced that during the second part of the project, which started in December of 2007, he was ordered by Mediu, despite his concerns explained in a letter to the prime minister Berisha, Mrs. Topalli and Mediu. Following this, the pressure came from a "young man" on the phone, who later was confirmed to be Shkelzen Berisha, the son of the prime minister, who ordered the high caliber munition to be rerouted to Gerdec immediately. When asked whether he reported this to the General Prosecution, he confirmed, adding that he had handed all information and documents needed by the persecutors, except for the information concerning the son of Prime Minister Berisha. He said that he didn't feel safe enough to report this. The ambassador said that for the investigations of the Prosecution to be successful, those who know the truth must speak up. Hoxha agreed that it was in the interest of the justice that he speak up, but he didn't say that he would do so. (note: Hoxha said that many others knew about this event). This is the second incident regarding a state official sharing his deep worries about his personal safety in full confidentiality with the USA ambassador. (The first case was that of deputy of the Supreme Council of Justice, Kreshnik Spahiu)." ²²Immediately after this leak was became public, this event became a recurring theme on daily basis in the albanian politics. As expected, the opposition was the first one to comment on this.

²¹McLuhan, Marshall, "*Instruments of Communication: media as an extension of the human being*", Tirana, Institute of Dialogue and Communication, 2008, pg.22

²²Wikileaks: <http://cablesearch.org/cable/view.php?id=08TIRANA470&hl=luan+hoxha+shkelzen>

The very first day, it was the nenkryetari of the opposition Erjon Brace who gave a speech on this matter, after two days the leaks became an issue handled by the Parliament, while in a public appearance, the leader of the Socialist Party, Edi Rama, declared that “Prosecution could not ignore the amount of facts regarding Gerdec”.

For a period of about two weeks the opposition was focused completely on this leak while the representatives of the political party in power kept saying that: “the documents and publications of WikiLeaks are a violation of the law and do not represent the standpoint of the United States of America”. The actual surprise came just five days after this was made public, when the General Luan Hoxha himself gave a speech regarding this leaks.

Hoxha declared the following: “While I confirm that this confidential and a courtesy meeting, which I had as an ex-Chief of General Staff with the ambassador John Withers, I would like to make it clear that during the entire meeting, I never mentioned the name of Mr. Shkelzen Berisha in relation to the events of Gerdec or in relation to any other matter discussed friendly and confidentially. My testimony on my responsibilities, the procedures and circumstances regarding the unfortunate event in Gerdec, I gave willingly to the Ministry of Defense, National Security Council, the Prosecution and the Court, based on the truth and the law. Beyond all speculations, this remains my complete and only testimony regarding this event. During my entire career in the military, I have always struggled to give my best in every task I was charged with, both during normal and challenging situations. For my work, I have been rewarded by state, national and international institutions”.²³

After the declaration and public denial of General Hoxha, Prime Minister Berisha made his first public declaration on the matter. During the TV program “Opinion”, he said: “When my son told me he would bring this matter in court, I said no. We cannot consider WikiLeaks the same way Edi Rama does, who became a member of his party. The leak said that in 2007, Mr. Hoxha received a phone call from someone who sounded like a young man and thought he could be Mr. Shkelzen Berisha. This would have been very simple to verify. If he really had received that phone call and were threatened or told to do so, then it would have been very simple to find out who it was on the phone. Today this man, publicly declared never to have said such a thing. I want to say that all documents and files prove that the second agreement involved the disassembling of missile shells and that this was the worst offense that happened. My son has never had any phone contact with Luan Hoxha or any other military official”²⁴.

After this first declaration, Prime Minister Berisha continued to express his standpoint on the matter also in another speech at government where among other he said: “Ex-ambassador Withers has applied personal politics in Albania”. This statement of prime minister Berisha seems to have “opened the game” and served as a reason for the ex-Ambassador Withers to send a public letter where he stated: “Even before leaving Albania, there have been rumors that I had a “personal agenda” during my stay in Albania. My superiors have considered these accusations as untrue and have denied them categorically in an official statement, which later become public, to the highest members of your state. The same pretence has risen again. And again it is untrue. Ironically, nothing proves this more clearly than the documents of

²³“Tema Online”:<http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2011/09/08/luan-hoxha-serish-ne-rolin-e-frikacakut-nuk-e-kam-permendur-shkelzen-berishen/>

²⁴“Klan”Televizion, “Opinion” Talk Show

WikiLeaks themselves. Irrefutably they show the fair considerations, impartiality and objectivity of the reports of the Embassy over Albania during my stay there”.²⁵

This public statement of the ex-ambassador Withers made the headlines in Albania because, while he didn't agree with the publications of WikiLeaks, indirectly he accepted them to be true since they were the prove of his impartiality and indirectly confirming the authenticity of his meeting, and its contents, with the ex-General Luan Hoxha. The USA Ambassador at the moment, Mr. Arvizu, who wasn't spared by the journalists' curiosity on the recent developments, also commented on Withers's letter. Mr Arvizu said that he could not comment on the letter of his predecessor John Withers. He added that there was nothing to say regarding the contents of that letter. “We do no comment on the kabllogramet of WikiLeaks, Withers's letter speaks for itself”, he said.²⁶

In the published leaks, some politicians have even been accused of collaborating with crime. Another case which deserves our attention for interpretation, not only because it is mentioned in the documents of WikiLeaks but also because it has received mixed comments, is that of ex- Minister of Public Affairs and Transport Sokol Ollashi. According to leaks, Mr. Ollashi is suspected of contraband of goods and narcotics. Furthermore, together with the Minister of Justice Enkelej Alibeaj, they are suspected of creating a scheme to free certain prisoners so that they could be used as “muscle” during the election of 2009.²⁷

In his reaction in the media about these accusations, Mr. Ollashi considered them completely nonsense. “I'm prepared to give my full collaboration to the institutions, starting from justice institutions; I am willing to testify before the Parliament of Albania”²⁸. In the same way Ollashi commented on the accusations about his role in trafficking narcotics. “We have no confirmation on whether this information is fetched from the USA Embassy of some other source through WikiLeaks, this still needs to be verified. Its writing style however doesn't seem like an official one to me. It sounds to me more like a Balkan gossip style rather than the one you would expect from a serious administration like that of the United States of America. I have had the opportunity to be the Minister of Internal Affairs of this country during a very busy period involving the war against organized crime and narcotics trafficking. I have also had the luck and privilege to book excellent progress on this front, progress which has been confirmed by EU's reports and DASH in their yearly report on Albania”.²⁹

In an interview taken by Ben Andoni for Mapo Magazine, ex- Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Paskal Milo commented on the “phenomenon” WikiLeaks. “...Historically, all ambassadors were required to report on what they heard and saw. The only difference right now with the phenomenon WikiLeaks, is that the layers of dough were discovered before the pie was baked, putting in a quite uncomfortable position governments and countries, ambassadors and politicians. Assange and his organization shook the foundations of modern diplomatic communications. Somehow the United States's diplomacy fell victim of the modernization of diplomatic communications in this electronic era, ... modern technology makes it

²⁵“Tema Online”: <http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2011/10/05/withers-konfirmon-dosjen-e-zeze-te-berishes-ne-washington-e-plote/>

²⁶“Tema Online”: <http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2011/10/06/arvizu-letra-e-withers-flet-vete/>

²⁷ www.wikileaks.org

²⁸ <http://www.top-channel.tv/artikull.php?ref=rss&id=218079>

²⁹ <http://www.top-channel.tv/artikull.php?ref=rss&id=218079>

possible for classified information to be stolen using just a personal computer”.³⁰ When considering the Albanian context, Milo points out that the Albanian politicians mentioned in the leaks will be put in a difficult moral situation. “You wonder whether the Albanian politicians mentioned in the reports of ambassador Withers published by WikiLeaks will be put in difficulties? At least morally, especially those who turned foreign embassies into temples for defaming their colleagues, even though they were political rivals. We must differentiate between expressing a standpoint or opinion over political matters in a diplomatic context, and accusations, defamations or denigrations of a particular political individual.”³¹

³⁰<http://www.revistamapo.com/lexo.php?id=3211>

³¹<http://www.revistamapo.com/lexo.php?id=3211>

Conclusions

Considering all the facts on the matter, published in different media, it is evident that WikiLeaks had a great impact on the political communications in Albania. We can draw two conclusions based on the interpretation of these facts:

1. We cannot draw a final and unique conclusion about whether the publication of material by WikiLeaks is ethical or not and even more so when considering their usage by the albanian media based on the argument of reliability, as long as we don't know whether they are true or not. This same conclusion can be drawn when considering the argument that these publications violate the security and the right of state institutions to keep confidential information.
2. WikiLeaks has influenced the political communications in Albania even though the materials were denied and claimed untrue by the actors involved in the published material. It is enough to note that these actors have commented on these publications, which brings us to the conclusion that WikiLeaks had a direct impact on the media and political communications arena.

Suggestions and recommendations

Despite the extensive treatment of the communication issue in this paper, the long-term influence of WikiLeaks's publications in the Albanian political life still remains unclear. Issues like the reliability of published documents and the reaction of Albanian politics to them require further research.

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