

CHALLENGES OF THE ALBANIAN MEDIA SYSTEM

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Abstract

More than two decades from the collapse of the communist rule Albania boasts a truly fundamental transformation of the mass media. From certain viewpoints one can freely say that we have witnessed an unprecedented thriving of the sector, with respect to the number and variety of communication instruments. With the growing role of media in politics and social life in general, media professionalism and independence of thought becomes crucial for a healthy society. While one may brag about the modernization and digitalization of the media types in Albania, a number of serious questions rise. What type of media system is established? Can we say that the ever-changing power of democracy has rightly impacted media and communication in a country with little tradition and history of free media? Is modernization going alongside enhancement of information quality daily communicated to the public? How do financial difficulties impact media independence? Is lack of independence and professionalism more serious than financial trouble? This paper will look into some of these problems and challenges of the media system. It will try to give other names to deficient professionalism, such as lack of integrity, insufficient education, immature traditions, and see how they intertwine to bring about the problematic state of the Albanian media system. Through interviews with journalists, citizens and daily observations of printed and electronic media, the paper presents some conclusions noting that overall the Albanian media system has sadly become a strong instrument in the hands of political parties and their 'business associates', straying from the noble mission of serving the truth, citizens and country. Last but not least, the paper will refer to the accepted role of educational institutions and actors, and how they contribute in identifying and addressing the deep-seated problems. Promotion of citizen journalism could be a way to bring independence of thought and integrity to media.

Keywords: *Media system, independence, professionalism, citizen journalism*

Introduction: Where do we come from?

A little more than two decades ago Albanians found themselves fighting for freedom and democracy; a fight that was bound to end in the favor of both freedom and democracy. Back then few thought that fighting for democracy would prove easier than establishing democracy and democratic institutions that both generate and protect freedom. Most people share the belief that freedom and a free press in a modern democratic country are so closely related that one just cannot separate the two, without causing irreparable damage to both of them. The establishment of free press in a country with very little historic tradition of it was probably the greatest achievement of the Albanian society in its fight to overthrow the communist dictatorship. In this paper I will try to briefly examine and note on how the Albanian media has developed over the past two decades of democracy in the country; what are some of its advances and challenges; how media has influenced public life and what can be done to improve its contribution to democracy and freedom in the country. This paper is based on previous research in the field, existing literature, national and international reports, and interviews with journalists.

Two decades ago free media in Albania simply did not exist. The communist state controlled and oppressed everything and media was no exception. With such a starting point it is not difficult to see that the media sector in Albania has experienced a fundamental transformation. Back then there were only few Party or State owned and controlled newspapers and one public TV channel. Some twenty years later the sector has undergone a real boom with several newspapers and other periodicals, a significant number of television stations, national and local established all over the country. Overall the statistics show that there are more than 200 periodical papers, 56 local radio stations, 2 national radio stations, 71 local TV channels, and 3 national TV channels¹. Though initially founded as modest yet ambitious projects, nowadays a few of them boast digitalization and investments worth millions of Euros. Some of them have proven successful projects so far, employing dozens of people and exerting a substantial influence over the public, politics and businesses. Most of them however still strive for survival and are for years on the brink of bankruptcy. But even though we may acknowledge this positive transformation the real testing point of this success lies elsewhere. Does quantity mean quality? Is free media in a democratic country all about making money and employing people? What lies behind the flashy covers and bright TV studios? We all agree that any media in the capitalist world does have a business facet, but the struggle is to keep the essence intact, and principles uncontaminated. Free media in its essence is not business project, but a mission, in the philosophical and theological sense.

For many reasons traditional and new, Albania has experienced a difficult path towards building healthy democratic institutions in more than two decades now. Remzi Lani² was right in saying a few years back that countries coming from communist regimes were not able to establish democracies but rather *democratura-s*. Media building as any other democratic institution in the country has had a difficult path, packed with a number of obstacles, from financial vulnerability, political pressure, corruption, instrumentalization, clientelism, low professionalism, censorship, self-censorship, lack of tradition of free press, moral crisis, lack of integrity, no prior tradition of unionism, just to mention a few. While we realize that the media and media corp live in Albania and are part of the diseased system we have built over

¹ Baka, Besnik, (2011). *Media vs Politics: Transition towards political (in)dependance*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

² Lani, Remzi, (2011). *Professional Journalism and Self-Regulation*, pg. 42, Paris, UNESCO

the years, because of the amazing role media can play in shaping a society and its individuals, our expectations for what it should be and do are much larger.

Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini in their comparative analysis of media models distinguish between three types of media systems in the democratic world³: 1. The North Atlantic liberal model, with a dominance of market mechanisms, producing a strong commercial media; 2. The democratic corporatist model of the North and Central Europe, with the historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied with organized political and social groups, where the state has a relative role, but legally limited, and 3. The Mediterranean model, a pluralist and polarized model, and strong control of state over media. In any democratic country with an established social media system the primary role of the media is to promote democracy and free thinking. In doing this, the media is a powerful instrument in the hands of the public, demanding and ensuring accountability of the governments and all other political and institutional actors, who act on behalf of the public. For anyone who has lived in Albania for the past twenty years, it is not difficult to see that the Albanian model resembles the Mediterranean type, a pluralist media, yet highly polarized and rooted in politics. It nevertheless incorporated its own rather original traits. In the Albanian case, even though the initial efforts might have been sincere and true, the long transition towards democratic institutions, lack of tradition of free press or long known authoritarian voices in the press community, coupled with a comprehensive moral and financial crisis has certainly helped establish a media system that so far has not been able to transform into a social one. Our media system might easily be labeled as a hybrid type that is somewhere between a political media system and a 'business group' media system, otherwise called 'business elite'.

In our case, the media has proven to be an inefficient tool in the hands of the public, because of incapacity, unwillingness and lack of courage to perform this role. In a society, like ours, where the real crisis is not economic, or financial, but a crisis of values, it is quite logical to see that the media partakes in this crisis. It is a known fact that media is definitely a strong drive for change in any country democratic or not. The power it can have over people, over what they think and how they perceive things and people is both amazing and scary. For this very reason it is essential to examine media in its minutest parts, because a diseased media will only feed a diseased system. Nowadays with the amazing gallop of Information Technology both the printed and electronic media have as never before in the whole history of humanity the opportunity and capacity to reach every corner of the world in a few minutes. With this unbelievable power the media has become not just an enviable instrument, especially for those in power or those who seek power, but one that the healthiest individuals of a society need to be vigilant about. Like everything else in the universe, media can incorporate both good and bad, it can serve both good and evil purposes. Examples of media being used to serve political ends are many in the history of this country, dating back several decades or even few years. Both politicians and their 'business associates' in Albania have learned by now that the best way to cling to power, to seek power, to promote businesses or certain people is by maintaining a 'close relationship' with the media 'bosses'. The politicians recognize their own power to distribute favors and promote interests if they choose to do so. On the other hand the 'media bosses' and even some categories of the media community realize their power and are not ready to surrender it without taking something back. Thus, it is unfortunate, but true that the media system we have established in the past two decades is one that is based on political favors and political servitude. A media system based on political and business transactions, rather than on a mission to serve the truth, speak

³ Hallin. C. Daniel, Mancini. Paolo, (2004). *Comparing Media Systems, three models of media and politics*, Cambridge University Press, <http://www.cambridge.org>, retrieved May 2013

the truth and shape trueness in the society. Mutual agreement on the respective powers leads to mutual favors. While the third party, the public is left to watch how the media partakes in the fall to corruption.

But media is not an abstract notion. It is comprised of people, of reporters, editors, editors-in-chief, publishers and owners. The problems lie in the status of each of these categories that make up the media. Their difficulties and shortcomings constitute the heart of the issue. A very important question, in my view, is who owns the media in this country? The history of Albania's transition has demonstrated a typical feature of Albanian capitalists or owners in all sectors. A type of a 'bossy' behavior that reminds one more of 'mafia bosses' than free people in a free country with an entrepreneurial spirit, who value people's intelligence and integrity, because they want their business to be built upon such values. No doubt this is a symptom of primitive 'slave-owner' mentality that has nothing to do with either democracy or freedom. Forget about professionalism and education. With such media owners, it is not difficult to see why the media suffers lack of independence, professional and moral standards.

And the other matter, closely related to the ownership issue is that of financing and transparency of financing. The existence of a big number of newspapers, periodicals, TV and radio station does have an impact on the financial aspect. This kind of inflation makes it more difficult for the media to become a commercial one and manage to generate funding from national or local businesses through advertisements. The old saying "the root of all evil is the money", can be slightly amended to suit our case as "the root of the problem lies in the source of the money". Because the media is not able to generate money on its own, then it is obliged to turn to state funds or other types of businesses. The English have a famous saying that can illustrate my point here: he who pays the piper, calls the tune. As in the case of any other human activity financial funding and its transparency is crucial to determine the nature of the activity it is used to support. And we are not talking about some papers who strive to keep going, but about big newspapers and TV stations, whose audience and influence is much larger. The problem is with the media that are able to invest millions and there is no transparency whatsoever where the money is coming from⁴. Much is talked about state funding to pro-government media, but lack of transparency of the money coming from all other sources is just as big. The real race between pro-government and opposition media nowadays is about getting favors. The media that is 'currently in power' is envied by the opposition media, who in its turn supports those who seek power, because their victory means a shift in favors. With this situation one can easily say that the line between media and politics and economic benefits is so vague and that the Albanian media is currently living in '*real politiks*'.

With media owners coming from different obscure pasts, with money coming from obscure sources, one cannot hope to have anything but an obscure media situation. Such owners no doubt are 'bosses' and they act as such. They either do not understand or do not care to understand what ethical and professional journalism means. On the contrary they determine the course of journalism and dictate censorship, such that best suits their business projects. This brings us to another type of censorship: self-censorship. Self-censorship is directly linked with ownership, as long as journalists are treated without respect, are not awarded legal contracts, are not paid accordingly or on time, and risk unemployment⁵. Consequently it is no wonder that they feel discouraged to exercise their professional freedom. The nearly inexistence of investigative journalism in Albanian printed and electronic media is the best

⁴ Goga. Thanas, (2009) *Footprint of Finacial Crisis in the media*, SOROS, http://www.idra-al.org/en/Media_Monitoring2005ElectionAlbania_IDRA_web.pdf, retrieved May 2013

⁵ IREX, Media Sustainability Index, <http://www.irex.org/>, retrieved May 2013

example of the self-censorship practiced by Albanian journalists. It is funny but in a situation where journalists or reporters do not investigate and verify facts and doubts, it makes more sense to call them 'interpreters' rather than journalists. Nevertheless, amidst of social problems choosing between ethical and professional considerations and more material ones is really a difficult moral dilemma for us to judge.

During the process of writing this paper we contacted and interviewed five young journalists, who have been in the business for the past ten years. We asked them three questions. One: Is it a practice to be told what to write and how to conclude the writing? Two: have you ever thought of writing a strong piece and then changed your mind because you thought it would stir up trouble? Three: are you disappointed with the status quo of Albanian journalism? All five of them, answered: 1. Yes, 2. Yes, but it would not be published, 3. Yes.

Albanian journalism is some twenty years old. There is no previous long tradition of journalism in Albania. This fact coupled with a saddening fall of academic exigency in our educational institutions has come to produce generations of graduates that are below average academic or professional scores. If anyone disagrees with this statement, I would simply suggest to read what many of them write or listen to how they formulate their thoughts. Many of them have insufficient knowledge of their mother tongue, but this is the object of another paper.

The problem amounts, when a society in crises does nothing more but aggravate the situation. Generations of people are now accustomed not to think in terms of values and integrity, but rather on terms of quick success, fame and money. Generations that do not see a society or a media community that promotes truthfulness, integrity and hard work, but rather a media community that sees everything based on rich and poor, big salary or poor salary, success or failure. And success in the media community does not simply mean becoming a famous journalist; it may as well mean becoming a politician.

Public credibility is in fact the litmus test for journalism in Albania. It is an accepted fact that the Albanian politics in general has little credibility among Albanians. People view politicians as opportunists, arrivists, cheats and corrupts. In a nut shell, the overall perception is that Albanian politicians have failed to convince their citizens that they pursue political careers because they see it as the path to make positive changes in the country and the life of citizens. The public opinion is quite consolidated that the vast majority of the Albanian politicians and parliamentarians, irrespective of their political affiliation, is in politics because politics has shown it is the best and fastest way to promote personal or group interests, to the disadvantage of the overall public interest. With media in close ties with politics in general, there is no other way, but for the media to partake of this shame. The paradox is that nearly all of the electronic or printed media in the country as self-proclaimed independent and unbiased. However, the division of the printed and electronic media into quite clear political lines, to the extent that even comic shows are crammed with political propaganda, has had a tremendous effect on the fall of the media credibility. Examples of news editions where one would think I had rather attended all political activities in person than watch them on TV are not rare. Media has become the forum of the political leaders in the country. Day after day the Albanian citizens are condemned to watch what 'A' said and what 'B' replied. And then what 'A' did and how 'B' replied. And this silly, unproductive game goes on day after day, year after year. On top of this, examples of former journalists who have claimed independency of thoughts for years and suddenly decide to enter politics certainly do not help.

The far reaching influence of the media is manifold. Media is a strong instrument for social education and promotion of human, national and democratic values. In the modern world,

even though the channels of communication and information are more varied than ever before, the majority of the population in Albania still relies on television and newspapers to connect with the world and form opinions. This dependency on media for information and consequently education calls for a more critical examination of the quality of information that is served to the Albanian public. So how well has the Albanian media fulfilled this educational role in the past twenty years? Instead of giving a one-sentence answer let us list a few critical comments. The first criticism goes to news editions. There is ever too much focus on political life in general. Without going into how unbiased or biased reporting is, too much focus on even unimportant party life or propaganda does nothing else but polarizes views and creates a misconception that nothing else matters or happens in the country, but press conferences of the main political actors. Second, there is too much focus on sensational news and in most cases on tragic events or macabre happenings. While we understand this may have a direct influence on audience figures, it also promotes unhealthy messages and evokes criminal thought. Third, spurred by this buzz idea of being modern, we observe promotion of a reality that simply put does not exist, or in the best cases is the reality of a minority. We see many especially daily afternoon programs on national TV stations which spend hours on end discussing about dieting, nail care, hairdressing, and plastic surgery and so on; Programs that fill young people's heads with notions of vanity and superficial beauty, as the highest forms of human beauty nowadays. This is most worrisome especially for the influence they have on the most vulnerable individuals in the society, young children and teens. While we sadly note that there are few programs and little air time allocated to educational purposes, to decent communication, etiquette, reading, history, travelling, sports, and music playing, cooking, and gardening and so on; to activities that benefit the body and the soul, the individual and the society.

In a democracy that has a long way to go to democratize and consolidate its three branches of power, and while the main regulatory authority in the field of electronic media NCRT is still in need of authority and independence, the fourth power needs to look into itself for improvement. The establishment of a self-regulation mechanism that guarantees elevation of ethical and professional standards in Albanian journalism is indispensable. So far divisions within the media community, lack of a tradition of unionism, insufficient vocal self-criticism by authoritarian voices have all contributed to the low level of internal togetherness. Apart from internal solutions, civil society can play its role in addressing media concerns and pushing for solutions. As in many other cases we have mentioned in this paper, even in this area we are not very rich in tradition. Civil society needs strengthening itself. Its deficiency in authoritarian voices, which are deemed independent, unbiased personalities with integrity, certainly does not help. However, be it personalities from civil society or other media authorities who have a name and can afford to be vocal in the protection of democratic rights and universal values are called to serve this mandate. In this context much more is expected and demanded from more experienced journalists, from those who have already built a name and career. They are less vulnerable and their criticism more influential.

The support and promotion of self-regulatory mechanisms, union of journalists and even civil society by the international organizations is crucial. Neither the government, nor politics, or business community are interested to push these issues much further. They must pretty happy with the status quo.

With the emergence of social communication networks a new form of shaping and expressing free thought has appeared. We see nowadays numerous citizens who are vocal about their concerns and suggestions for improvement of political, social and other matters through the social networks. This could be promoted. Newspapers may try to publish opinions of simple

citizens who think freely and fear not, because they have no favor to lose. Citizen journalism could be a good thing for Albania and Albanian media.

Conclusion:

Twenty two years ago Albania started its path towards becoming a democratic country. The establishment of freedom of speech is perhaps one of the greatest achievements since then. About two decades after the country certainly enjoys a pluralist media, with numerous newspapers, magazines, periodicals, and TV and radio stations. Some of them even boast modernization and digitization.

But the important issue is has diversification and modernization brought along quality in communication?

The Albanian media, as it is, looks more like an extension of politics or businesses than an advocate of social and country interests. It is not quality driven. It is not independent. It is not a social media. The difficult years of Albania's transition from totalitarianism to democracy has produced a media model that resembles that of the Mediterranean countries, highly polarized, politically dependant, strongly influenced by the state and certain business circles, who instrumentalize media to promote their political and economic interests. In a society that has long been drowned in a deep crises of values and morality, the media has chosen the easier path; it has partaken in the fall into corruption, unprofessionalism and cowardice. It has failed to use the tremendous power it has to promote positive change and democratic values. In front of political and financial pressure it has agreed to a "give and take" relationship with all parties that need and seek media influence for their benefit.

In this paper we have tried to answer this question by analyzing the scene and various actors and stakeholders that play a dominant role in the media arena and determine the current state of affairs in the sector. The grave situation of the media ownership is seen as one of the main reasons behind the fall into political and economic dependence and unprofessionalism. Media owners, mainly 'businessmen' either in nature or career, closely tied with politicians and business interests see the media they own as an instrument to promote their own narrow interests, rather than as a means to promote democratic change, values and professionalism. Mere journalists feel bossed about, unprotected and even threatened.

With a media seized by the stronger, more influential and affluent members of the society, the only change can come from within. Establishment of self-regulatory mechanisms that ensure ethical and professional standards, consolidation of the Union of journalists to protect them and fight for their rights is the only way to overcome this state of corruption. International partners have a role to play in supporting journalists and their right to self-regulation and advocacy. Also authoritarian media personalities should be more vocal about professional rights and obligations towards the public. With the establishment of social communication networks, they should open up newspapers and TV programs to the more independent thinking of mere citizens.

If in 1999, a revolution was needed to establish free media, today it is again time for another revolution; a revolution that will free media from its chains and bring it at the service of the citizens, country and democracy.

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