Media ethics in the era of digitalization

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The internet became popular as a mass communication technology practically right after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, although it is not possible to establish any causal connection between the two epochal events. Nevertheless, the inherent inclination to democratize, decentralize, and make the systems massive is common for both cases, and it brings with it collateral effects.

The Albanian online media, although somewhat late compared to their counterparts, were perceived at the very start as extensions of traditional media outlets – in the sense that the existing newspapers and magazines bought online space and began to post or upload there, in essence, the very same material being published in print; the only difference was that this time, material was made available to readers for free.

Since the print media in Tirana had not had the time to consolidate in the role that media outlets usually play within democratic and pluralistic systems, they conveyed to the web the very same infantile defects and shortcomings of their adolescence of the 1990s, when hopes and enthusiasm gradually were replaced by partisanship and the media, which initially had independence illusions and dreams, came to make themselves, sometimes voluntarily, blindly available to political sides.

Pluralism in Tirana has always leaned toward fragmentation, in the sense that parties or social poles always imposed in all spheres, including in public communication, a feudal model of division into parcels, according to areas of political influence and support. It has always been in the direct interest of political parties to control the media, even in those cases when control has shifted to the opposing side; oligarchies prefer polarization over independence, in the sense that they want to always make sure that they are facing their opponent, not the public opinion as such.

The online communication model, including for traditional media, required revisiting financing methods, given that a website needs to fund itself, as a rule, from advertising only. Meanwhile, readership of traditional newspapers grew meager, just like everywhere else. The print newspaper in Albania today is read mainly by a social category that has not yet been penetrated by the internet as a technology. The new generation is used to obtaining information through electronic methods – from a computer, but increasingly from tablets and smart phones. If new technologies have been embraced, for known reasons, only by a privileged stratum of the Albanian society, it is just as true that this same privileged stratum plays a disproportionately major role in the society, establishing elites of all categories and colors.

Except for maybe television, Albanian media of the 21st century appear as extremely poor in financial means to function as media outlets. This is not just about the salaries paid (when they are paid) to journalists, but also about the quality of material (*content)* offered

to users. The internet itself requires the managers of these media outlets to reformulate, often profoundly, their survival strategies, in an environment and context where the public is no longer willing to purchase information and opinion.

The payment factor should not be seen solely through the lense of the economist or accountant; the simple transaction of money that changes hands from the reader to the newspaper also serves to found and build the ethics of accountability, as a relationship between the newspaper and the public; and, from the moment consumer readers no longer pay for information, their right to hold the media accountable no longer applies, nor can it be claimed as before.

Furthermore, when the media no longer see themselves as accountable to the public, then the only way is for an increase in their dependence on centers of influence and power, which in Albania's specific circumstances can only have an oligarchic nature.

The overall economic and financial conditions of the Albanian media help us understand what is happening today with information in the Albanian space, particularly in the circumstances when new technologies have pushed the old ones to the side, have made them old, and forced them to appear on sale for peanuts.

In developed western societies, where the internet has led the traditional media to a crisis – not just print media but even television – even the hope of long ago that online pages could make up for expenses and even make a profit thanks to the combination of incomes from advertising and the number of clicks is fading away. Maybe it is not too surprising that this slow catastrophe has not led to shrinkage of information; it has only shaken the foundations of the media's relation to democracy and their accountability to public opinion.

The phenomenon is directly linked with the problem of *sources* of information that is conveyed to the public: where exactly does the information that the tens if not hundreds of online media pages in Albanian offer, every single day, come from? There is no need for any scientific analysis in order to be convinced that the majority of online material is conveyed from one medium to the other, like cargo cars when they change the engine or the tracks. The contradiction between the artificially high number of media outlets and the relatively small number of real sources represents a direct attempt at the role of information in a pluralistic and democratic society.

The online page of a national newspaper, due to insufficient funding, takes its materials often from the pages of an affiliate newspaper; from television – which often not only conveys but even produces news artificially; less from national and international news agencies, and more by freely copying up and down the web, according to a logic that is in essence parasitic; and, lastly, ready from the press and propaganda offices of political parties, state and executive offices, and foreign embassies and other representations in Tirana.

This colorful panorama is lacking precisely the story that is sought, verified, and pursued by the medium itself, with its own experts and its own human and financial resources; such absence cannot be simply billed to today's integration of mass communication processes around the world.

It costs very little to copy a story from an internet website, and even translate it, who knows, making use of the automatic and still foolish translator of Google; political and institutional parties and interest groups send their press releases for publication free, nor do they pay anything to exploit the media as spokespersons or propaganda megaphones. Those few political journalists that have survived in staffs are in permanent pursuit of party chairs and "kreshniks" (knights) of daily politics, turning microphones to them even when they simply cough or sniff. As to the rest of the page, that can be filled up with all sorts of stories taken for the crime pages, or and especially, with whatever "happened" on television the night before.

The first victim of this approach to news is investigative journalism, undertaken by professional and dedicated reporters, who manage to impose themselves as credible mediators between the truth and the public.

On the contrary, always due to the drain in finances and in real journalistic expertise, the investigative journalism of long ago is being replaced by the so-called *leaks;* these often assume the shape of documents found through various ways, unverified and unverifiable, which in fact exist in some hanging space between truth, lie, and forgery; in fact, more than documents, they are artifacts of journalism that now communicates through metaphors, as the Oracle of Delphi did.

The *leaked* documents, as global practice has demonstrated recently (*Wikileaks*), may be useful to some extent as catalysts to inform or raise the public's awareness; however, their existence and function cannot be legitimized, aside from the verification practice, which, in the case of Albanian media is entirely lacking. The public itself, which is fed such material, in essence lacks the critical approach toward news as such. This happens because a politically polarized public is prone to accept without verification any news that is served by a militant medium.

Therefore, even in the circumstances when the truth *is created* in the instance of news production, the public is differentiated according to the media it consumes; in the sense that the readers of *Tema* live in a qualitatively different world, in many aspects, from that of the readers of *Gazeta 55;* these are two worlds that don't have many meeting points between them; nor do they share the events that are conveyed or mediated by the news. This happens because for the media it is easier to create bubbles and mirages of fictional worlds, regulated according to specific interests, than to convey information on the real world.

Likewise, the same technology that is used to bring to the public the *leaked materials,* or other material taped through hidden cameras or microphones, is very well used to edit or forge such material; a document or photograph may be fixed through Photoshop; a video may be edited by taking off or adding passages. There is absolutely no reason to insist that new technologies allow us to approach the reality more often and more easily. On the contrary, facts have shown that, to date, first, fraud has rushed to take advantage of them; and, in mass communication, truth always remains the most costly option.

On the global scale, this second decade of the new century is proving also that enthusiasm for a new role of electronic media and social networks in the democratization of political systems and the very transmission of information was, at best, premature. New technologies come with extraordinary opportunities for all sides in communication;

however, no technology, nor the internet, nor Web 2.0, nor multimedia, nor the integration of telephony with television and the internet, can make up for structural shortcomings in civility, in the desire and the willingness for public engagement and the ethical pledge of the sides involved in this communication.

The media in Tirana only had semi success, even with their policies – seemingly very easy and at very low costs – of opening the virtual "doors" to readers, in the context of Web 2.0's interactive technology, giving the public the opportunity to express itself freely in the same space as the authors or voices of authority; and to openly debate on ideas brought forth for intellectual consumption.

The excellent potential of this technology, which has to do with the establishment of a direct and real time contact of readers with the media and authors of articles, did not produce the expected results. This is explained through various reasons, among which I would single out the lack of a cultural tradition in public discourse. I would also add and emphasize the marked pollution of the debate in the state's leading *fora*, such as the parliament and the executive. The pollution resulted by the "heroes" of the media, or the protagonists of this public debate; and page administrators leaving the space for comments non-moderated, in the name of respect for the freedom of anonymous speech.

What happened, and continues to happen today, is that this public space dedicated to debate *was captured* by the discourse of hate and the irresponsible word of the anonymous, whose ranks grew filled with provocateurs, all sorts of scribblers, and people with personal grudges to settle, both with the authors of commented stories and with one another. The catalyst of this process was precisely the anonymity, which separated word from man and cultivated, willingly or unwillingly, total irresponsibility, which came to assume the simple, and known, forms of pure vandalism in the most visited sites and the hottest topics of debate.

Thus, a good and seemingly productive idea yielded undesired results due to mismanagement and a characteristic utopia for Web 2.0's most optimistic period, when it was thought that anonymous commentators could moderate one-another horizontally, by self-regulating with time. The utopia failed to take into consideration the fact that many of the "masks" in the spaces for comments took advantage of their often offensive and destructive discourse to create all sorts of *cliques* and to cultivate their fictional personalities.

This phenomenon is also encountered elsewhere in the global web; practically, anywhere that public's lively interest for hot topics is not accompanied by any care by page administrators to discipline the debate. Experience has shown that debates between the unknown and the anonymous, allowed to develop at will, have often ended up in hotspots of infection and censorship on free speech. Deficient moderation inevitably brings a radicalization of the discourse, which automatically censors dialogue between the sides, thus allowing only exchanges of insults and a reproduction of political, cultural, and geographical trenches.

As in other cases, it was proven that democracy costs, even when it's about the public's spontaneous participation in debate and dialogue; and that lack of disciplining control and oversight, by an authority with censoring competencies, does not help free speech, nor does it enable its realization as an elementary human right. Rather, it is only used to

impose horizontal censorships, which as a rule destroy debates either by scaring participants away, or by channeling terms toward banality.

Thus, even the unmatched bloom of social networks, blogs, forums, and pages of online comments has proven and continues to prove, paradoxically, that the rich and diverse productivity of Web 2.0 does not produce anything of a sustainable value, outside dependence from the most traditional media – or those magical spaces where raw information is mediated or processed. In an ideal world, the new technology would have helped integrate interactivity into communication's basic mechanisms, as it may be seen in some of the most prestigious online pages of *The New York Times*, or *The Guardian*. Otherwise, when one believes childishly that technology, *as such,* would be enough to ensure the democratization of information and to forge loyalty ties with the reader, results disappoint regularly.

In the end, all technologies we use in the media, from the printing press to the radio, television, and the internet, with all of their multimedia and interactive aspects, are imported technologies, which were developed in societies that are qualitatively different from ours. Traditionally, the role of the media in the Albanian society has always been played by cafés, the bazaar, and other public places, where information always moved orally, in the form of gossip or *leaks* of another nature, and where the prestige of the source was always a criterion in assessing the truthfulness of the news. This traditional role, now limited and integrated into the modern *mass media,* has nevertheless been preserved, by changing its skin accordingly. Maybe that is the way to explain also why the Albanian society, the current public of all political and cultural colors, strata, and preferences, accepts to some extent news that floats between truth, lie, and fraud; demonstrating a strange willingness for information to be taken and consumed beyond any need, even ethical one, for verification.

The media themselves find it much easier to give this public what it desires and to be involved in a somewhat pervert process of mutually limiting modeling, rather than fight to create a public that is vigilant toward political, economic, and social developments in a country, even toward the quality of information offered by the media themselves. The new technology is very powerful, both in terms of the space and the profundity of its use, but it does not bring any ethics with it. On the contrary, it is the power of the technology that questions us all, forcing us, in a way, to face ethical standards directly; an encounter where the media have their part, but where accountability will always be shared with the public.