

Public Service Media (PSM) and the double challenge of digitalization

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The management of the digital future of the Public Service Media (hereinafter PSM) and generally the media in Albania is as much a **perception problem** as it is an **application problem**. So far, the perception of the process of switchover to digital broadcasting generally suffers from its understanding as a simply technological problem, although the law and the relevant strategy demonstrate care both in guaranteeing pluralism and in strengthening the PSM's public character during and after this process. Objectively, too, delays in drafting the Strategy for the transfer from analogue broadcasts to digital broadcasts and the approval of the law 97/2013 "On audio-visual media in the Republic of Albania" on the one hand, and European deadlines for the completion of this process on the other, give technological standards priority significance.

At present, RTVSH offers: 2 national audio-visual broadcast programs, 2 national radio broadcast programs, 1 audio broadcast program in foreign languages, 1 audio broadcast program for compatriots, 4 regional audio-visual center programs, and 1 audio-visual satellite program – all of these programs having a generalist character. Due to delays in discussions by interest groups about the National Strategy for Digitalization and the "fait accompli" arbitrariness of private operators in the Albanian private media market, RTSH felt pressed to begin broadcasts also in dedicated channels, as a first step toward shaping the new RTSH platform. While **TVSH** became also available in HD format, under the **RTSH HD** logo, at the same time as the 2012 London Olympics, **RTSH SPORT** began broadcasts as a channel dedicated to sports, combining archive materials with new sports events of the national and global market. **RTSH MUZIKË**, which began on October 1, 2012, provides musical creations, spectacles, and musical documentaries produced by TVSH and third parties, folk and city music; recitals by Albanian and foreign artists, the Eurosong and Sanremo festivals, children's festivals and video-clips by Albanian and foreign artists. **RTSH ART**, which began broadcasting on November 1, 2012, offers Albanian and foreign documentary and fiction movies, series and soap operas, classical music, ballet, opera, and domestic and foreign theater productions. **RTK** (Kosovo Radio Television) joined these programs afterwards. At present, the **RTSH digital package** is offered in 5 channels, 4 of which in the **SD** (standard definition) format and one in the **HD** (High Definition) format.

RTSH's offer is completed on the web with brief domestic news, news from the region and the world, the radio and television program, information on the organizational structure, and parts from the law and statute of RTSH. Apart from the not-always-swift web page www.rtsh.al, RTSH regularly offers broadcasts of TVSH and RT in **livestream**. Besides the presence of each of the main RTSH programs on online networks, RTSH formats may be presently followed also in the RTSH channel on **YouTube**, an offer that demonstrates a diversity of themes and formats as well as stable audience indicators.

The conditions for this expansion were created through the consecutive steps of technological renovation in the past 6 years, which include: replacement of analogue cameras with digital ones, digital synchronization, dissemination, processing, and control of audio and video signals, introduction of registration and reproduction servers, introduction of non-linear (digital) editing, modernization of lighting technology (lights and digital remotes), technological modernization of graphics, completion of stage sets with videoprojectors and background screens (led wall), installation of the internal phone system and electronic monitoring in all premises, ensuring a minibus for DSNG satellite broadcasts with installed master controls, etc. Technological measures were supported with training for broadcast technicians, editors, lighting specialists, and reporters, although the fast pace dictated a strained regime of theory combined with practice, which was often stressful to the older staff members.

These steps were undertaken in spite of the **Strategy for Switchover to Digital Broadcasting and the Project for digitalization of broadcasting at RTSH**. Delays so far dictate the synchronized coordination of RTSH and all other operators in order to carry out the switch-off of analogue broadcasts on June 17, 2015. In order to respect this deadline, given the characteristics of the terrain, the plan coordinates the quick coverage of areas with dense population while taking advantage of the existing equipment and its transport to locations where it is lacking. During the first year, at least 60% of the population and the Adriatic coastline will be covered with digital signal (districts of Tiranë, Durrës, Fier, and Elbasan). During the second year, the Ionian coastline and an important part of the northwestern part (districts of Lezhë, Shkodër, Vlorë, and Korçë) or 80% of the country's population will be covered. During the third year, 90% of Albania's population will be covered to include the districts of Berat, Dibër, Gjirokastër, and Kukës.

Preserving the PSM's mission in the digital age dictates the priority of transferring its programming into digital platforms. Thus, based on global practices, PSM does not need a license for building its digital network/networks and programs relying on it/them. Audiovisual Media Authority grants to RTSH frequency assignments to build up to 2 national digital networks. RTSH has the right to support also one local program on its digital network or in private digital networks in the districts of Shkodër, Korçë, Gjirokastër, and Kukës. Given that the deadlines established for building RTSH's digital networks are the same as those for building digital networks of private broadcasters, for cost reduction purposes it was decided to combine building of the first network (MUX1) of the public broadcaster with building the networks of local broadcasters. The expansion of transmission capacities of the public broadcaster (building of MUX2) will be realized at the same time as building the first network. This requires the establishment of the optimal number of programs to be considered valuable for fulfilling the mission of the public broadcaster and determine the needs for other services of the public broadcaster (HD, interactive services, etc.). Programs considered as fulfilling the RTSH's public broadcaster mission (which, upon public consultations, upon proposal by the public broadcaster, are approved of by AMA) shall be free to air. RTSH may also offer conditional access programs to compete in the media market, depending on free spaces on the network and financial capabilities after the switch-off of analogue services. Conditional access programs do not enjoy benefits from the RTSH's public financing scheme. Their funding is realized by advertising and subscribers of this service. The total investment for building two national RTSH networks (MUX1 – **1,837,836,000 ALL** or **1, 413, 7 20 EUR** and MUX2 – **1,225, 224,000 ALL** or **9,424,800 EUR**) is estimated at **336,936,600,025 ALL** or **919,000 EUR**. MUX 1 will be a combined national/local network, thus enabling local

broadcasters to make use of it. Therefore, the cost of building it will be higher than in the case of a simple national digital network. The funding for the project of the 2 digital platforms and three mobile satellite transmitters of RTSH will be done by loans, which will be guaranteed and paid for by the regularity and modalities of the collection of the TV set tax.

The realization of the plan also requires that the audience is equipped with decoders of MPEG 4 compression system, while MPEG 2 decoders are currently used to receive digital signals of existing private operators. In the Albanian territory, the need for universal decoders to ensure standard TV signals and some subsidy schemes (100%, 50%, and 7%) for families unable to pay on time indicates a total of 985,643 decoders. However, due to the configuration of the terrain, even after June 17, 2015, no Albanian broadcaster will be able to cover more than 90-95% of the territory. The remainder, like in other countries, will be covered through satellite, although this requires special acquisitions of broadcast rights in spite of terrestrial broadcast rights. It is proposed that the broadcast of sports events, movies and programs that are not permissible to broadcast over satellite, is done by encrypted signal, so that the population of these areas – which pays the receiving set tax – is excluded from payment for the encrypted signal.

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In accordance with the letter and the spirit of the law, there is no doubt that the guidelines for the PSM strategy in the digital era are: ensuring editorial independence; its full service to public interest; development of broadcast technologies and monitoring fulfillment of obligations. The political national and global moment makes the uncompromising management of the PSM on the path to success indispensable, both in terms of **standards** and in terms of **competitiveness**.

The objective challenge for meeting this goal includes: 1. selecting the model and drafting the strategy for the **harmonization of standards**; 2. raising awareness among the Albanian **social and media** environments on the **importance** of the PSM, to **consolidate competitiveness standards** and **avoid the market's blocking tendencies**; 3. respect for deadlines of **digitalization** and **technological integration standards** of the PSM in the European audio-visual market. The strategic importance of transforming the RTSH and the lack of regulation in the media market dictate the need to reform the criteria and procedures for the selection of leading staff in RTSH, toward a leadership style that combines consistence with flexibility, willingness for challenges with the ability for compromise, professional competence with the social one, orienting skills in the media reality with profound knowledge of the model, imposing skills with good management of group work.

In spite of the narrow and manipulative approach of the public discourse about it, PSM reform in Albania – after overcoming the serious management emergencies of recent years – will need to be concretized as a **Platform for strengthening RTSH's public status**, which presumes:

1. **strategic reform**, which guarantees RTSH's editorial and managerial independence and the establishment of observing and exposing structures for legal and procedural transgressions. The law "On Audio-Visual Media in the Republic of Albania" (97/2013) provides some guarantees, through: the creation of the Council for viewers and listeners (article 112), with a

monitoring function as well as a function to report to SCRTSH, AMA, and the Committee for Education and Mass Media; obligation to draft the **Public service broadcast contract** (article 117); prohibition of political and religious (article 120) propaganda and the establishment of live audio-visual broadcasts of Assembly activity (article 119).

2. **administrative reform**, concretized in: **modern entrepreneurial culture, transparency, effectiveness**. The law guarantees RTSH's proper administrative functioning through: sanctioning the service fee for the use of the receiving TV decoder and its definition (article 115); guaranteeing RTSH's rights for loans relationships, service contracts, entrepreneurial agreements with other subjects (article 113); allowing the exploitation of commercial opportunities in accordance with RTSH's goals (article 118); the right to propose tariffs for the use of signal distribution infrastructure by other broadcasters, which relieves RTSH from blocking and delays in collecting relevant tariffs from private parties (article 122); obligation to regulate ownership, reflected in the registration of assets as immovable public property, administered solely by RTSH (article 114), and the obligation to **divide the independent production fund** (article 123) used by RTSH only upon open public competition for the selection of bids.

3. **organizational reform**, which **reforms division of labor, shortens** administrative links, **saves** labor, **expands** geographic presence, **expands** service practices, **unifies** technical structures, and **increases** effectiveness.

4. **reform of human resources**, which guarantees **flexibility** and liberalizes employment, pension, and voluntary engagement.

5. **logistical reform**, which meets **logistical standards** for **technology, image, and policies** of a modern media – with space, light, greenery and standards, promoting competence, transparency, and digital competition in the modern communication society.

6. **technological reform** – which realizes the digitalization of RTSH broadcasts through maximal optimization of time in compliance with the relevant strategy, considers **Archive Digitalization** a final step of the **digitalization of the RTSH in production** and **Content Management System** – network connection of links – as finalization of the digital administration of the enterprise and the media product.

7. **programming reform** – which aims at increasing the audience through information speed and credibility, quality, and diversification of offers, the addition of formats and co-productions in the country, region, Europe, and the world.

8. **institutional image reform** – through **enriching, diversifying, and** coordinated **marketing** of brands, completing the **social infrastructure, and** taking under **social patronages**. Even the consolidation of RTSH's presence on the web is an image challenge, **on the conceptual front** – through transparency of RTSH's activity and interactive forms of communication with the public, **on the professional front** – through offering information and editorial content in real time, **on the technical-formal front** – through attractive layout and expanding service capacities, with a view to facilitating the use of this offer.

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However, the digitalization challenge cannot be reduced only to PSM, technology, or its form. The process bears and enhances a series of problems and phenomena of the Albanian media market and society, which first and foremost touch upon the foundations of the media and its relationship with the society. It dictates a verification of democratic, ethical, and professional standards, abused by the unregulated market and social indifference; it requires denunciation and non-compliance. Non-transparent funding and violations of license obligations, fictive audience measurement and non-transparent sources of technology, pirating of audio-visual products and violations of copyright, arbitrariness of reporter's salaries, lack of technical and fire safety, poor ethics, violation of privacy and presumption of innocence, gender, age, region discrimination, and abuse of the weaker, presence of violence, sex, banalities, and anti-educational models, linguistic misery, snobbism, consumerism, monopoly and empty idols derive from the lack of standards and equal opportunities for all; from the absence of a hierarchy of moral, social, and professional values respected by all; from the absence of financial and legal parameters, applicable to all; from the control and monitoring mechanisms applicable to all; from evaluation and opening of perspectives for all.

Concern about the broadcast media cannot be just technological. The decision on the media – public or private – is a decision on mental health, a decision on the model and perspective of democracy, a decision on the development of the society! Digitalization does not make media better; it just makes access, models, impact, and its actors scarily massive. If the society comprehends that, digitalization reduces evil; if not, it risks assuming pandemic dimensions!