

## **Introduction**

In the last years, media's role in Albanian society has become increasingly influential. Media's role as government watchdog is being perceived as a useful tool for the development of different sectors of social development. Media has an important role in covering and introducing into the public debate in the country these important issues.

There is no doubt that social issues must be part of this public debate. The way that the media covers issues of social importance is a very good indicator of media's maturity, professionalism, and skills in fulfilling its public mission. For this purpose, in the framework of a project supported by the Soros Foundation, the Albanian Media Institute has carried out a monitoring of print media on some important social issues, such as poverty, education, and health. Based on the findings of these monitoring reports, this publication also includes a policy paper, which summarizes the main problems identifies in reporting social issues in the media, as well as potential suggestions for improving this reporting in the future.

# **Monitoring health issues in Albanian print media**

## **Introduction**

The issues related to public health are especially delicate in transition societies and this applies also to Albanian society. The health sector can be considered as the only sector that has marked progress during the transition period. However, the reform in this sector has been slow and corruption has been widespread. Meanwhile, Albanian society is exposed to such diseases as HIV/AIDS, which did not exist previously.

Information has a vital role in preventing different forms of diseases. In this context, the media also has a special role. While public television has played this role until some years ago, commercial media has also made attempts in this area. However, attempts are sporadic and limited in general. This is evident also in the absence of regular television programs on this topic, as well as the absence of a permanent page on this problem in Albanian dailies. Consequently, the public is not sufficiently informed on the way that the health system works, on citizens' rights, on the cases of epidemics, etc.

On the other hand, there is a media tendency to intrude into private life, even in cases of public interest. The media tend to limit itself on the specific, or do they cover the phenomenon? What are the ethical problems in covering people affected by the problems of the health system or from different diseases? Which are some of the ways of informing the public on topics of vital importance to them? Is the information sufficient, clear, and continuous? These questions constitute the focus of the one-month monitoring of six daily newspapers on this topic.

## **Methodology**

In order to examine how the media covers health issues and to identify what are the main trends and problems in this aspect in the daily newspapers, we selected six daily newspapers to be monitored. The newspapers that were monitored for this purpose were the following: Shekulli, Panorama, Gazeta Shqiptare, Shqip, Standard, Albania.

Newspaper circulation in Albania is not made public and there are no alternative ways of controlling this figure. In addition, the number of sales of newspapers is even less known, as there is no obligation to report this figure, except for tax collecting bodies, which see this figure as privileged information. For this reason, the selection of newspapers to be monitored was made having in mind the general perception in the media community on this issue, as well the feedback received by newspapers editors and directors. The aim was to select the newspapers with the highest number of sales and circulation, which is supposed to translate also in a greater influence on the public. However, lacking the verification tools for this criterion, we used alternative methods that led to this selection of newspapers.

The monitoring period of these newspapers has been May, 1-31, 2009. Even though this monitoring was first carried out in a previous month, it was decided that it would be more appropriate to monitor this month on this topic, since this period marks the peak of

suspicions and spread of swine flu epidemic in the world. For this purpose, monitoring of health issues moved to this month, in order to carry a real test of Albanian media conduct in these very attentive moments of the whole public in health matters.

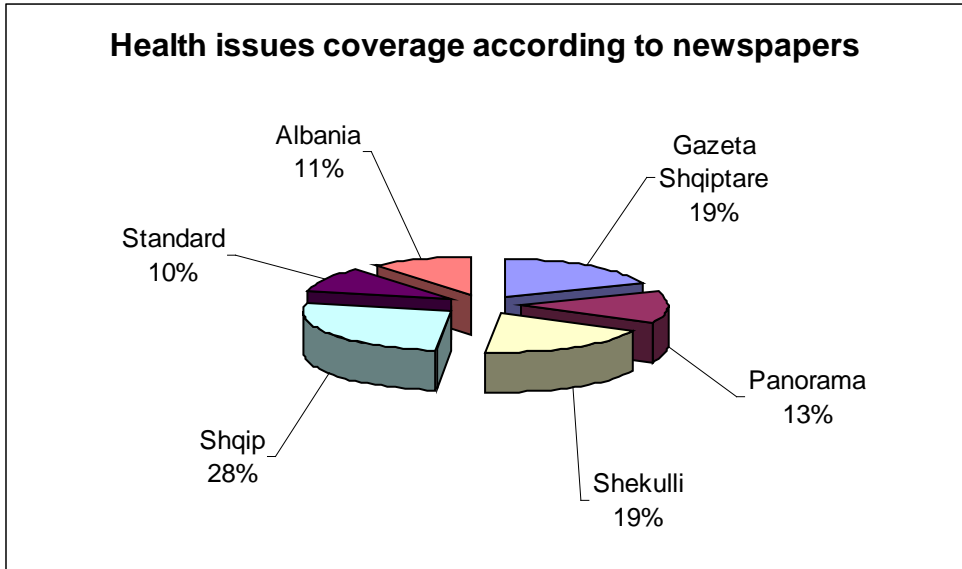
Monitoring was both quantitative and qualitative. From the quantitative point of view the monitoring focused on the total number of articles, the division of articles according to different topics, the general space devoted to education in the newspapers compared to other topics, the position of these articles in the newspaper, etc. From the qualitative point of view, the analysis focused on the topics addressed, on the sources of information used, the coverage of health trends and development, epidemics, quality of information, etc. Hence, the main aim of this monitoring was to identify where the daily newspapers stand in respect to their public mission in informing on health sector developments in the country.

### **Qualitative monitoring**

Analysis of monitored articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The total number of monitored articles in the six newspapers was 278. The monitored articles did not include just the news, but also the editorials, features, brief news, etc. The length of the articles varied from two paragraphs to the entire newspaper page, depending on the news.

<b>No.</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Number of articles</b>
1	Shekulli	54
2	Gazeta Shqiptare	53
3	Panorama	37
4	Shqip	75
5	Standard	28
6	Albania	31
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>278</b>

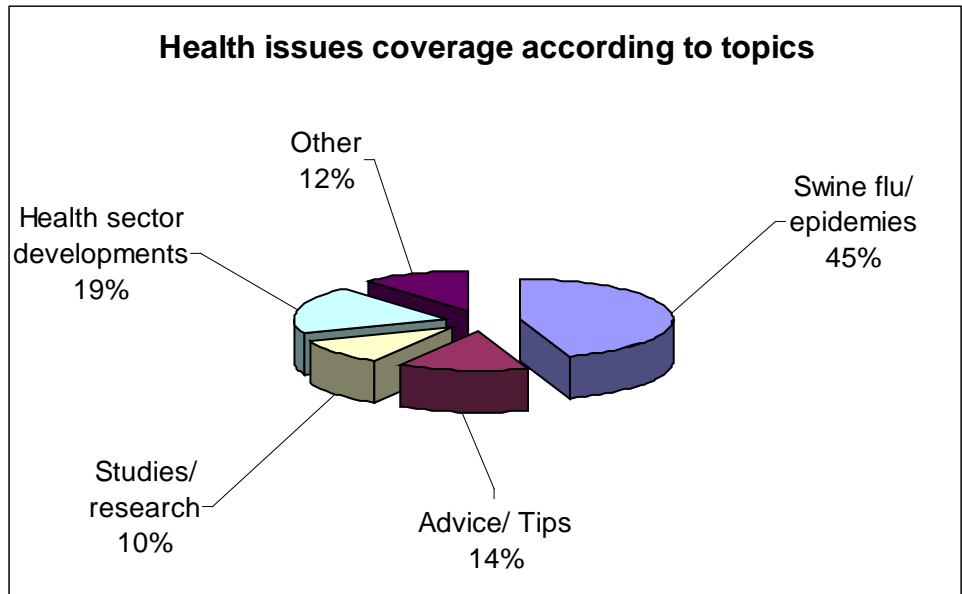
The following graph depicts the division in percentages of the articles according to each monitored newspaper:



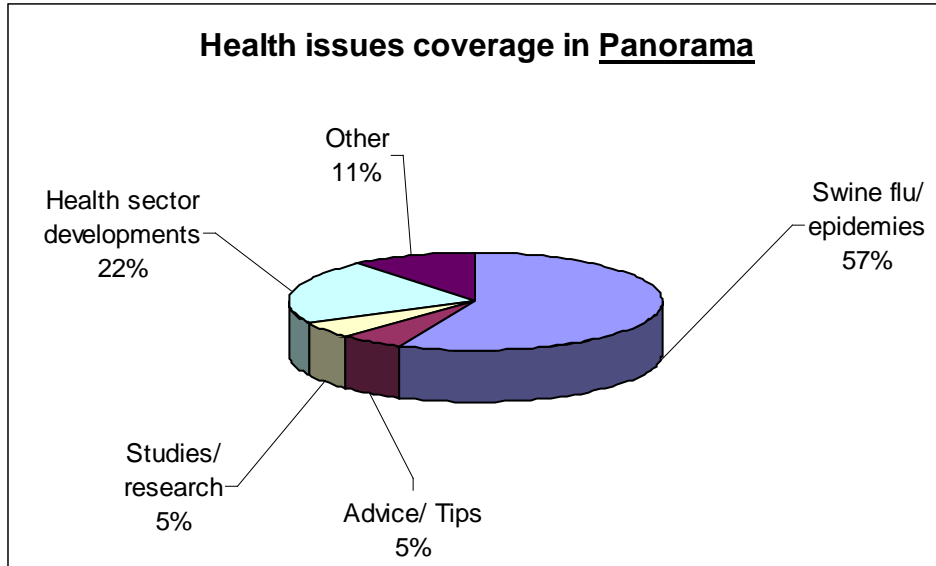
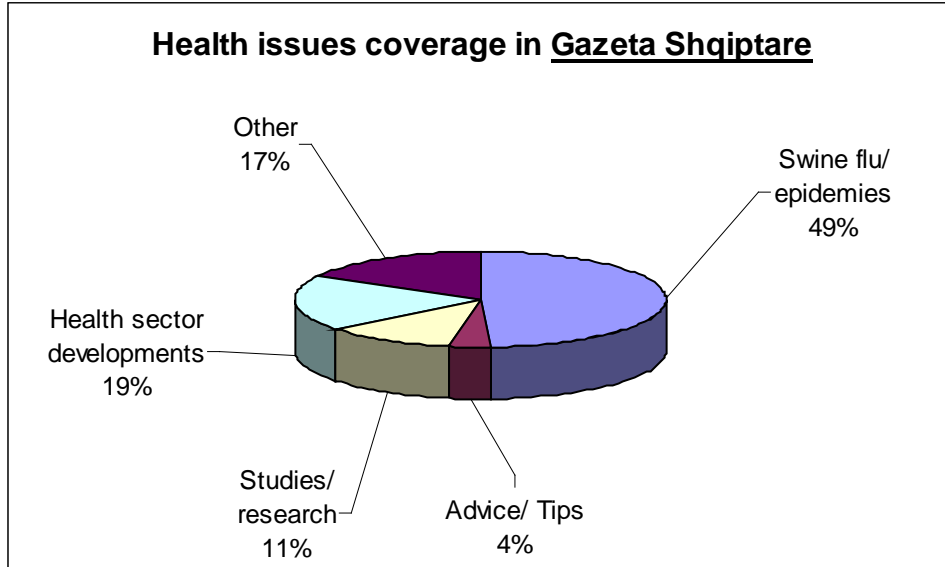
In view of the topics and kinds of articles observed during the monitoring, the main categories that can be discerned are the following:

- Swine flu and other cases/suspicions of epidemics;
- Articles that offer services (advice, questions and answers);
- The new developments in the health sector (reforms, medicine, the health system, changes in the hospitals, etc.);
- Articles that were based in specific studies or research (smoking, cardiovascular diseases, etc.)
- Other articles that do not fit into a specific category.

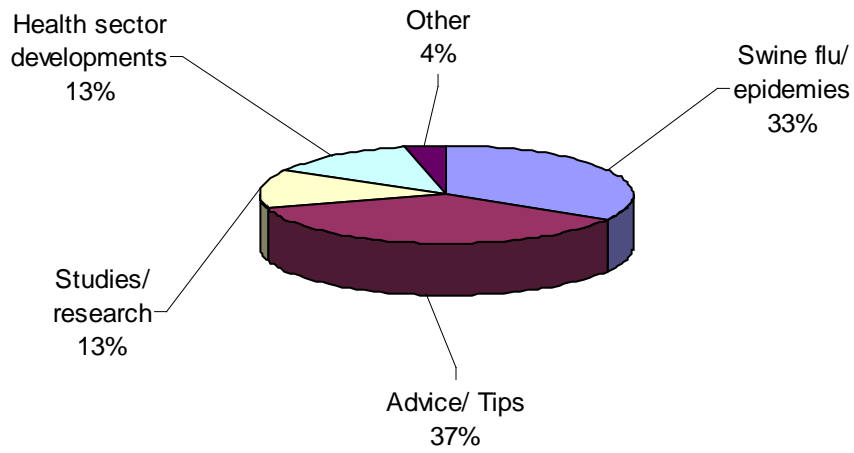
The coverage of these topics in the six newspapers is depicted divided into percentages in the following graph:



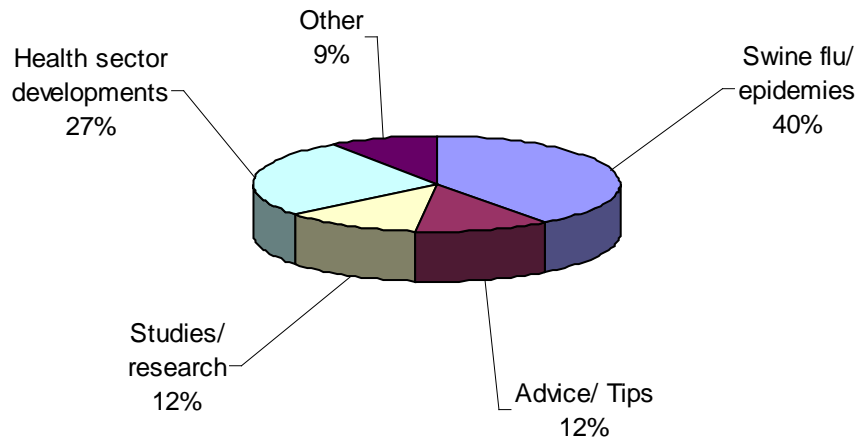
In order to have a clear idea of what has been the importance assigned to each topic in each newspaper, the following graphs show the division of covered topics for each monitored newspaper:

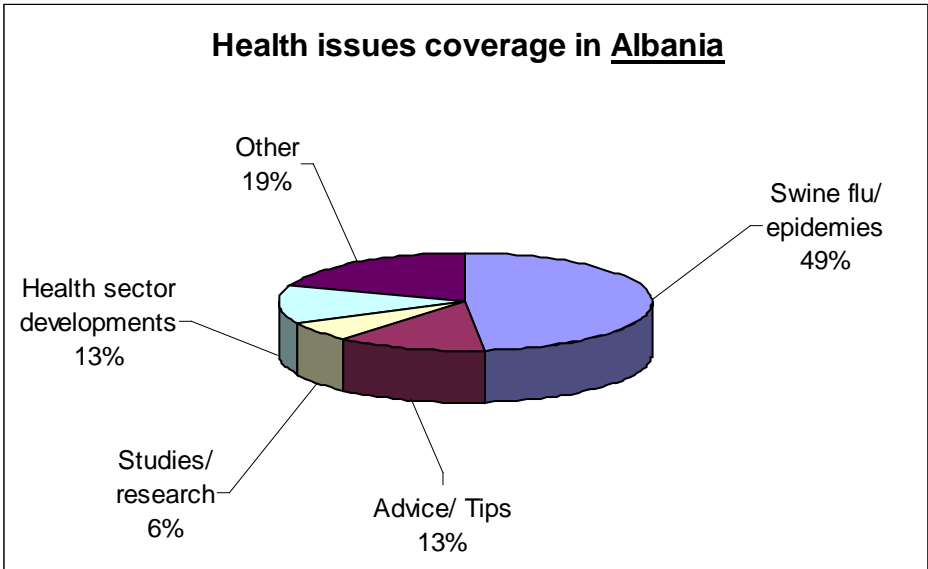
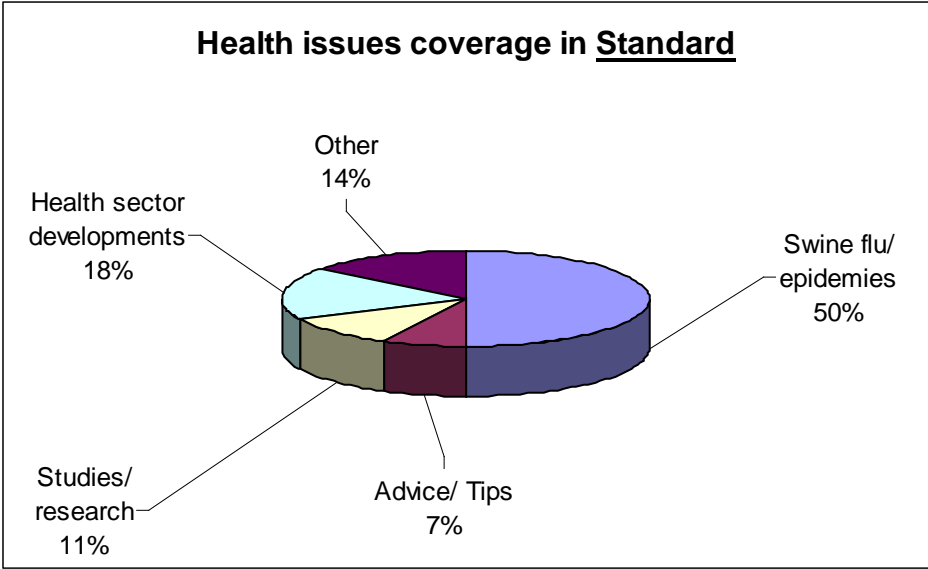


### Health issues coverage in Shekulli



### Health issues coverage in Shqip





**Qualitative monitoring**

In order to closely follow the main trends in covering health sector in the Albanian press and identify the areas that can be improved, the analysis of monitored articles was carried



out in terms of the main categories and topics identified during the monitoring. Since the topic of the swine flu was prevailing in all newspapers and having in mind that in these cases media has an even greater responsibility for informing the public, the analysis will be divided into two parts: the first part will examine how this epidemic was covered in Albanian newspaper, whereas the second part will identify other trends in the coverage of health sector in the Albanian press.

### *1. Coverage of swine flu epidemics*

As it was mentioned above, this month has been an active one for journalists covering health, as it marks the rapid spread of the swine flu epidemics in the world. Since media has not only an important role, but also a responsibility in these delicate cases, it would be interesting to see how the media has covered this development of utmost importance for the whole public.

It is clear that media has a special informative role in many sectors of the society and this role is best expressed in the way that media serves public interest. One of the cases when this role is stronger than ever is that of epidemics, different diseases, natural disasters, national emergencies, etc. In the case of this monitoring, the media role in covering epidemics is quite important, since the media in these cases has a primary informative role. This is explained by the simple reason that in cases when we speak of quickly spreading epidemics, reaching even pandemics, having in mind that this might be a lethal disease, the quickest way that doctors and experts can use in informing the public is the media. Media constitutes the simplest and most efficient bridge of communication between health experts and the public. Precisely for this key role that media has in these cases, it should show a special responsibility, being more careful, but even more efficient than ever with the information it conveys to the public.

More specifically, how have the Albanian newspapers performed regarding the reporting of the swine flu epidemics? First of all, it should be said that this topic has been covered by all newspapers, without any exceptions and without neglect from any of the newspapers involved, even though some papers had a more detailed coverage and used different tones as compared to others. Hence, the basic information, refreshed with new information, was easily available in all newspapers. Basic information in this case included the spread of the disease in the world, the measures taken, the symptoms, the measures taken in Albania, the map of the disease spread in neighboring countries, etc. This information was available in every health page of the six monitored articles.

Something else that needs to be said in the case of coverage of swine flu epidemics is related to the sources of information cited on the epidemics and its distribution. In these cases, for the sake of information accuracy and the fair and not alarming information of the public, official sources must always be present. In the case of the coverage of epidemics, all articles of these newspapers have regularly cited official sources and experts. For example, it is important to notice that officials of the Ministry of Health or even the minister herself, officials of the Public Health Institute, as well as

representatives of the infective hospital, are always present in the articles monitored for this purpose, at least one of them.

Having in mind the cited sources, it is a natural conclusion that the information conveyed to the public in relation to the epidemics will have at least the necessary minimum information that the public needs. This category includes information such as the disease symptoms, the measures taken by the state or specific regions, advice for avoiding the epidemic, what should be done when epidemic is suspected, etc. Hence, this minimum necessary information was available in all newspapers, even though many of them went beyond the minimum.

In addition, in the aspect of practical advice for prevention or curing, it must be said that each newspaper allows a regular space for this information that the public needs to have, and this information comes from official sources and/or experts. The same can be said also on informing on the situation of the spread of epidemics in the whole world, information that all newspapers made available. So, the newspapers provided an overview of the situation in the country, in the region and in the world. What has to be underlined in these tendencies is that the interest in reporting on this topic has been preserved during the whole period, unlike with other news, where interest fades almost immediately, as soon as a new topic comes up.

➤ *Main characteristics in reporting swine flu epidemics*

If we would have to do an assessment of the coverage of swine flu epidemics in Albanian newspapers, one of the positive aspects of this coverage is related first of all to the quality of sources of information that convey the necessary information for the public. As it was mentioned above, the articles almost in every case have cited official sources of the public health. The statements of these persons have had all the necessary space in all daily newspapers and have been able to convey the necessary information to the public. In this aspect, media has carried out well its role as a communication bridge between public health officials and the public itself, making its space available.

In addition, through cooperation with these official sources of information, daily newspapers have brought information during the whole month on the measures that the state has taken for protection or for facing the spread of epidemics in Albania. These measures include the fund started by the government for this purpose, the telephone number available to the public, the situation of the vaccines, etc.

It is important to notice that some newspapers did not suffice themselves just with information on measures taken by the state. They have tried to verify on field if these measures are implemented the way it was promised. This includes mainly the situation with vaccines in the drugstores, the control at border points, attempts for disinfecting, situation in the clinics, etc. For example, an article described the situation of traffic in the largest port in the country, in Durrës, describing in detail the procedures followed for the control on the virus H1N1.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, some other articles address the topic of the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Kontrollet ne port, asnje i dyshuar per virusin H1N1," *Shqip*, 2 May, 2009, p. 27.

deposits of Tamiflu vaccines in the apothecaries, attempting to identify what is the situation and what should the state or other individuals do.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the newspapers have been careful to cover and report the different border passing points, assuming that the virus would be brought from people coming from abroad and for this reason a strong control would be very important:

“The observations on the border passing point of port of Vlora show that the so-called measures taken in the border point are not satisfactory. There are no visits, interviews, or disinfecting in the ferries. Inspectors expect for the passengers to go to them and tell them that they think they are sick or that they have been affected by swine flu and then take measures to take them to the hospital. At the border passing points the passengers have admitted that they did not receive any information on the swine flu and there was no control.”<sup>3</sup>

These attempts to verify the implementation of measures for the persons as identified affected by the swine flu have covered almost all border crossing points. There have been different reports from the Rinas airport, from the border points of Kapshtica, the ports of Durrës and Vlora, etc. So, while the above paragraph shows the absence of control for the port of Vlora, another article in the same page shows on the measures taken at the border point of Kapshtica:

“Regarding the numerous travelers that come in and out of this point, the health authorities have been aligned next to the police officers and ask the travelers if they have had any fever or signs of flu, in order to prevent the spread of this flu, which is rather dangerous to humans. Regarding the quarantine established in the city of Bilisht, it has been located in the hospital of this city, while there are some medicine, masks, and everything necessary for facing such an epidemiological disease ...Meanwhile, on Friday, taking advantage of the holiday, the dorm of the university “Fan Noli” was disinfected, as well as some nine-grade schools and high schools in the city of Korça.”<sup>4</sup>

The information has also been received from the Muriqan border point: “At the border point of Muriqan, the work of health inspectors continues to be carried out by police officers, who examine every person entering the border if they have any flu symptoms and ask every tourist where they come from.”<sup>5</sup> The same has happened for the points of Kakavija, Tushemisht, etc.

The journalists also have been careful to examine the conditions of policlinics in the capital and other cities and their level of preparation, since these are the first contact points with every suspected case of flu in the country. For example: “An observation made in Tirana revealed that only two policlinics were equipped with white blouses, masks, and gloves.”<sup>6</sup> Similar information was provided also in the following days:

---

<sup>2</sup> “Mjekët e urgjencave nuk dallojnë dot gripin e derrit,” Shqip, 2 May, 2009, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> “Gripi i derrave, anashkalohet kontrolli,” Shekulli, 2 May 2009, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> “Nis dezinfektimi i doganave dhe shkollave,” Shekulli, 2 May 2009, f.9.

<sup>5</sup> “Muriqani, ende pa inspektor sanitar,” Shqip, 2 May 2009, f.27.

<sup>6</sup> “Kemi 3000 doza ilaçesh,” Panorama, 2 May 2009, f.9.

“The task force established near the Ministry of Health, has started to distribute disinfecting materials and awareness leaflets in the schools. ‘Everything is made in order to be prepared, because premises such as schools and kindergartens are most prone to epidemic explosions when the swine flu virus arrives,’ the ministry’s specialists clarify.”<sup>7</sup>

Hence, it can be said that there have been continuous attempts to test the government on the promises made, to the service of public health. Of course, having in mind the limited staff on social topics in Albanian newspapers and the insufficient financial resources, more could have been done in this aspect. However, the attempts gave certainly been there.

Similarly, along with the attempts to observe and verify on field the measures taken, the newspapers have also brought information on the figures of travelers at the main border passing points: “In the last two days (2 and 3 May) at the international airport ‘Nënë Tereza’ of Rinas have arrived 3,155 persons, out of whom 2,198 have been Albanian citizens, and 957 have come from Europe, America, etc.”<sup>8</sup> Or:

“Since the day when the alarm of swine flu has started, 233 Americans, 60 Canadians, 11 Israelis, 56 Austrians, 133 Germans, have entered the Rinas airport, all of these are countries affected by this virus...The foreigners have also included four Mexicans, whose country is the origin of the disease, where people have also dies. The Albanian health authorities have excluded the possibility of them being affected by the virus, as long as they lived in Italy for months now, instead of their country.”<sup>9</sup>

Another trend that should be welcomed in the context of swine flu coverage, has been the practice of special sections with questions and answers on the disease. These sections were either experts’ answers to public questions, or a list of expected questions from the newspaper itself, which were answered by the experts or official authorities. In this way, there was a tendency to answer the simplest questions, but questions that are crucial in cases of epidemics.

For example, some of the questions that are answered in a special informative article on swine flu are the following:<sup>10</sup>

- How did the disease erupt?
- What is swine flu?
- How dangerous is it?
- Should we be worried?
- Can it be slowed down?
- Can it be cured?
- What should be done to be protected?
- What measures should be taken?
- Is it dangerous to eat pork?

---

<sup>7</sup> “Gripi i derrave, ndahen dezinfektantë edhe në shkolla,” Panorama, 4 May 2009, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> “OBSh: Nuk ka vend për panik, por s’ duhet neglizhuar,” Shekulli, 5 May 2009, p.11.

<sup>9</sup> “Gripi i derrit, fillon dezinfektimi i avionëve,” Shqip, 3 May 2009, p.22.

<sup>10</sup> “Gripi i derrit: çfarë po ndodh?,” Shekulli, 3 May 2009, p. 20-21.

- What about the avian flu?

This example is an article with information taken by the BBC specifically to clarify the public on the different problems related to swine flu. However, it should be said that almost all newspapers have continuously had information on the disease, the symptoms, the measures that need to be taken, the potential prevention, state services, etc. In general this information is presented attached to articles with news on the spread of the diseases, usually in a special side box, with illustrations, with specific steps that the public should have in mind regarding hygiene, with detailed measures, etc. Hence, it can be said that there has been specific attention from the newspapers, both in content, and in layout, so that the basic information on prevention or curing of the epidemics was available at all time and easily identifiable and understandable to the public.

Another aspect of the coverage of swine flu in Albanian newspapers has been the following of disease step after step, not only in suspected cases or in regard to the measures taken in the country, but also in the progress of the virus in the world, especially in neighboring countries. The articles on this epidemics brought almost always updated information on the disease, its distribution map, the number of infected persons in each country, the death toll, etc.

Along the same lines, during the spread of epidemics or in the presence of risk of spread of epidemics, it is particularly important for the media to preserve some kind of “detachment,” and be able to convey accurate information on latest development, but at the same time to be particularly careful not to cause any panic among the public. In general, daily newspapers have passed this test satisfactorily, since reporting has been done in a detached manner, with no emotional involvement and with no particular alarms.

However, there are exceptions to this practice, even in the coverage of this epidemic. So, some titles or information might have caused a sense of alarm among the readers, such as this title: “The infective hospital is on alert, everybody is wearing masks,”<sup>11</sup> or: “The flu, WHO alerts on the pandemic: The virus can cause thousands of dead in the world,”<sup>12</sup> “Swine flu in Italy, Albania in greater risk.”<sup>13</sup> However, these titles are few and most of them are a coverage that can be considered correct and unexaggerated.

In fact, these titles are an old and stable trend of Albanian press, where the cases when there is a discrepancy between the title and the text of the article are frequent. However, there have also been some isolated cases when the notes of alerts have been obvious even in the text, at a time when such alarm, even though a contained one, was not justified by the facts or the specialists’ quotes. For example, some newspapers have addressed the first suspected cases of persons infected with swine flu with some kind of subjectivism, causing some degree of alarm or panic among the population. For example: “It has been kept a secret in order to avoid panic among the population. Until yesterday afternoon the health structures have been in a much greater alarm than declared publicly. ...The news

---

<sup>11</sup> Panorama, 28 May 2009, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Gazeta Shqiptare, 1 May 2009, p.12.

<sup>13</sup> Gazeta Shqiptare, 3 May 2009, p. 12.

is confirmed for the newspaper from secure sources of the Public Health Institute.”<sup>14</sup> The tone of these words causes to think that even though there might be infected cases, these will not surface, since the newspaper implies that these cases are kept secret, strengthening in this way the feeling of anxiety, insecurity and panic among the public.

Another article worth mentioning in this prism is the one that describes the situation of medical staff in the infective hospital, where an Albanian diplomat suspected of having contracted the virus H1N1 was admitted and was kept under observation for some days:

“Doctors and nurses equipped with protective masks and anxiety was visible in their eyes. However, in spite of this, the staff of the infective hospital tries to appear calm. The only thing betraying them is their moves. Seen from afar, they rushed to work beyond the usual intensity. Walkabouts, climbing the hospital stairs running, quick steps. However, in view of the alarm that a suspected case of swine flu was being treated in the infective hospital, the most concerned persons were the patients. Everybody tried to know something more. ‘It is sure. The flu reached us,’ were the words that were heard most frequently.”<sup>15</sup>

This is a vivid description of the premises and the situation that prevailed in the infective hospital and these words certainly bring the readers close to the mood, anxiety, or challenges encountered in these moments in these premises. Naturally, we have to consider that apart from these feelings, this description also brings another feeling or strengthens it even more: the feeling of insecurity, fear, anxiety for an epidemic that is sowing death everywhere in the world, as well as the feeling of panic that something nasty is in the air and is reaching this country, as well. Hence, conveying this atmosphere, while the rest of the article shows that this fear is not justified, since the suspected case does not have the virus, does not help to create a sense of calmness for the reader, which can be said that is an implied media duty in these cases, after accurate and correct information of the public.

However, these were extremely limited cases and the norm in general in the articles of monitored daily newspapers were an updated, correct, and calm coverage of the situation on the spread of the epidemics in the country and in the world. There were even newspapers that had addressed, even though in a limited and indirect way, exactly this need to soothe the anxiety that can be caused among the public on the news of disease spread. So, one of the newspapers had even asked a psychologist on the cases of epidemics and on its expected spread among the population and the conditions that would lead to a successful handling of the disease: “The people and the patients suffer the fear of the swine flu more, while the medical staff is calmer and not at all panicked by the news published on the virus H1N1.”<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, another article<sup>17</sup> stresses that there are other diseases, which are much more dangerous than swine flu. The article mentions several infective diseases, their

---

<sup>14</sup> “Negativ, rasti i parë i dyshuar për grip derrash në Shqipëri,” *Panorama*, 1 May 2009, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> “Infektiviteti në gjendje alarmi, të gjithë vendosin maska mbrojtëse,” *Panorama*, 28 May 2009, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> “Virusi H1N1 tremb popullatën, por jo mjekët,” *Shekulli*, 29 May 2009, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> “Pesë sëmundjet më të këqija se gripi i derrave,” *Shqip*, 18 May 2009, p.15.

symptoms, the map of their distribution in the world, the actual epidemics, etc. Even though this topic is not at all comforting at first sight, the article soothes to a certain degree the panic mania for the current epidemics, stressing that this is an unknown flu, but, however it is just flu, at a time when there are other epidemics much more dangerous than this one.

## ***2. Other trends of coverage of health in daily newspapers***

In attempting to draw an overview on the coverage of health-related issues in Albanian print media, what we notice is that there is a diversity of topics and information on this topic. Even though monitoring covers just one month and as such, it is rather limited, again, the topics identified during this month have been quite diverse. In some cases the articles not only informed on the situation in the country regarding a specific disease or problem, but they also offered practical advice, playing the role of a medical consultation for the public.

So, some of the topics addressed in the daily newspapers during this monitoring were related to smoking and its effects, on sexual health and STDs, diabetes, infective epidemics in summer, allergies in the peak of their season, treatment of tumors, arterial tension, cardiac emergencies, kidney diseases, safety of toys for children, skin diseases, etc. The articles on these topics are divided in different kinds: informative on the progress of diseases, services, consisting of practical advice or guidelines, or articles addressing a problem, which attempted to go beyond the news and investigate the responsible structure.

The main trend identified in largest number of articles is that they try to go beyond the information on a spread of a disease in a particular age group, or the measures that are taken for new appliances or treatments in a given hospital: most of the articles purport to serve also as guidelines (through the medical staff) for the interested public in a specific disease or problem. In fact, many of the newspapers also have a section, regular or not, with questions and answers from the public on a specific disease or medical condition.

So, a clear example is the weekly sector of Shqip newspaper, drafted in cooperation with the American Hospital, where every week, a different doctor addresses a specific problem. For example, the article with the title “Is it diabetes?”<sup>18</sup> responds to such questions as who are the persons at highest risk, how should type II diabetes be diagnosed, what is the therapy used, the main symptoms, etc., providing the reader with a complete file on this disease that is quite commonly found among the population.

These kinds of articles do not focus just on specific or common diseases. There are also numerous articles that address lifestyle trends that can lead to specific problems or diseases. This group includes especially articles on the nutrition habits and physical activity, seen especially from the angle of avoiding obesity and other diseases related to this condition. For example:

---

<sup>18</sup> Shqip, 2 May 2009, p. 12.

“The health experts advise the adults that they should engage in physical exercises for at least 30 minutes per day, five days a week. The experts say that any kind of physical activity is good to the health, but brisk walking improves blood circulation and lung functioning much better than slow or normal walks.”<sup>19</sup>

Another trend of newspapers in relation to covering the numerous health-related issues and problems is the cooperation with associations or personalities, experts in medicine, in order to report on a specific problem. Such an example is an article on lack of skills of medical staff, more specifically pharmacists, in the hospitals:

“The specialists of pharmaceuticals are available, but it seems strange that pharmacies of hospitals are not directed by these specialists. So, the pharmacy of the hospital of Kukës is administered by a veterinary, the one of the hospital in Shkodra by a chemist and the one in the hospital of Vlora by an assistant/pharmacist. The alarm has been given by the deputy president of the ‘Order of Pharmacists’, Besnik Jucja, who has clarified that these cases have been identified in the most important hospitals in the country, since the situation in other regions is even more alarming.”<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, another article deals with the problem of qualification of nurses, relying on official figures:

“The nurses have improved through the years, but they still have shortcomings in the basic professional education. So, currently, only 8% of 13,000 nurses in the country have higher education. ... These figures were made public in the national conference of nurses, where participants included Prime Minister Berisha and Minister Godo.”<sup>21</sup>

There are also articles that stem from different studies, usually carried out by the Public Health Institute, but also from other institutions. In general, these studies and consequently the articles based on them address important topics for public health. So, one of the articles of this category focused on teenage pregnancies:

“There are about 3.5% of teenagers in high schools that admit that they have been pregnant and then have aborted. The data comes from the Public Health Institute. In the survey, 4,000 students, randomly selected, the figures speak for themselves. Out of 100 girls, three girls have experienced pregnancy, all because of unprotected sexual relations.”<sup>22</sup>

Having in mind these figures of the PHI survey, the article has also elicited expert opinions on the matter, focusing on the causes for this situation and on what could be the grave consequences for these persons and for the society:

“My impression is that Albanians have difficulty in using protection, due to their mentality. In addition, males find it hard to accept that they can contract any sexually

---

<sup>19</sup> “Lëvizja, tre mijë hapa në ditë duhen se s’bën,” *Shekulli*, 9 May 2009, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> “Në spitale, farmacistët janë veterinerë,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 15 May 2009, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> “Infermierët, vetëm 8% me shkollë,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 13 May 2009, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> “Studimi, 3.5% e vajzave shtatzëna që në gjimnaz,” *Panorama*, 25 May 2009, p.8.



transmitted infection,- said Moisiu. –However, these diseases constitute among the main causes of sterility in young women.”

Hence, this is a clear example when the journalist has tried to use a survey for a specific problem, going beyond the figures or percentages. In this case, the article attempts to provide a full overview of the problem, going into physiological, but also psychological roots. Such articles attempt to fulfill media’s obligation for as an informative role as possible for the public interest.

Media could not be absent in the recent years’ attempts and campaigns against smoking; quite to the contrary, media is an important factor in this battle. So, one of the articles, after a PHI study on smoking habits, gathers other opinions on the matter: “According to the PHI study, smoking in the country is estimated to be at 39%, compared to 28.6% in European Union countries. Smoking is higher among males, rather than females, respectively 60%, vis-à-vis 18%.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the article provides other shocking figures, such as 16% of pupils in nine-grade schools and high schools smoke, while 16.7% of those that have not smoked, have thought about starting to, while 8 out of 10 teenagers are exposed to smoking at home.

These figures, which are not at all promising for the future health of the population, are also interpreted from the psychological viewpoint by publishing an interview with a psychologist, who tries to lend an explanation for this increasingly frequent phenomenon among youngsters. Similarly, the article also includes a specific angle on the negative effects of smoking. Hence, such an article uses the data of a study in order to provide as full a view of the phenomenon as possible, in explaining its causes, as well as in raising awareness among the reader on the damages and the measures that need to be taken.

Similarly, there are other articles that try to direct readers’ attention towards main trends of health in the country, or to establish a map of diseases that are most commonly found. So, during this month, there have been articles that deal with figures trends such as blood diseases,<sup>24</sup> increasing eye infections and allergies,<sup>25</sup> the widespread problems of cardiovascular diseases,<sup>26</sup> the kidney diseases,<sup>27</sup> problems of talassemics,<sup>28</sup> etc.

Hence, as it can be seen, there are more or less frequent attempts of social pages’ journalists to cover the trends of health problems in the country, supported by research or other official sources. Naturally, some newspapers have a more systematic and complete approach in this aspect, while other newspapers have other priorities. However, what can be said in general on the coverage of health in daily newspapers is that even though there is an increasing number of articles on this topic, these articles that represent specific trends or phenomena are initiated only thanks to publication of a research or issuing of

---

<sup>23</sup> “Shqiptarët, më duhanpirës se të gjitha vendet e BE-së,” *Shekulli*, 24 May 2009, p.9.

<sup>24</sup> “Çdo vit, 80 raste të reja me sëmundje gjaku,” *Shqip*, 21 May 2009, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> “Sytë, Tirana përfshihet nga infeksionet dhe alergji,” *Shqip*, 18 May 2009, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> “Urgjenca e Kardiologjisë? Nuk ka më vende për të sëmurët,” *Shqip*, 12 May 2009, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> “Të sëmurët me veshka, rreth 500 raste çdo vit,” *Shqip*, 10 May 2009, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> “Zenelaj: Çdo vit lindin 20 foshnja të sëmura,” *Shqip*, 9 May 2009, p. 24.

statements from official authorities or other organizations of this field. There is no genuine trend or will of newspapers to have a regular and clearly-defined page on reporting health sector, even though this is the most important issue for everybody, including journalists. This is partly due to the fact that newsrooms are understaffed and the journalist covering social pages has different topics to cover and health is just one of them. However, it is a fact that in general the coverage of the problem is limited to reporting on the latest news and a study, conference, or specific statement is rarely followed-up.

## **Conclusions**

What can be said on the coverage of the health sector issues in Albanian press, having in mind the findings of this monitoring, is that newspapers have a satisfactory attention and interest towards this topic. However, it should also be underlined that none of the newspapers has a regular page exclusively on health. Even though this is a matter of vital importance to all of us, reporting of developments and trends in this area is placed in the broad framework of the “social” page in the Albanian newspapers.

In addition, a clear trend of all monitored newspapers is that even though there is a satisfactory and diverse coverage of developments in this area. Coverage of news or problems in this area in most cases terminates with the news of the day and the progress or the phenomenon is rarely followed-up. Very often we see coverage on important surveys, conferences, or other important statements. It is very rare to come across reports on the topic or the problem exposed by these events in the following days, with the newspaper’s own initiative.

However, a sector that almost never misses in relation to the health sector, is that of articles that offer advice and information on different health problems, on nutrition, or lifestyle. In addition, the newspaper pages are open to the public and have turned into an important forum of information and communication for the public in relation to specific health problems. However, the newspapers have a long way in front of them before they become a significant and meaningful informative forum for the whole health sector, with all its complex processes and developments.

# **Monitoring education issues in Albanian print media**

## **Introduction**

Education is one of the areas that has experienced among the most rapid changes and reforms in Albania. This reform is a continuous one, both in the area of public education and private one. The print media displays a trend of covering this area regularly, while this trend seems to be weaker in electronic media.

In spite of the continuous efforts of the media to have a regular sector covering education, what can be noticed is that the coverage consists in reporting on daily news and events, without going in-depth in more detailed reports, or in the reforms on education. Even though different opinions come to this area are provided by different experts, these ones are sporadic. Meanwhile, education is an area that affects not only the persons directly related to education system, but also the whole country and its future.

In this context, the one-month monitoring focused on issues such as: How does media inform on the education system in the country? Is there a continuous trend to cover the problems in this area or does the media limit itself to covering separate events and periods, sensational or not? Is there a sufficient and qualitative debate on the reforms in this highly important area? To what extent does the media contribute to public awareness on education system, problems, reforms, and elections?

## **Methodology**

In order to examine how the media covers education issues and to identify what are the main trends and problems in this aspect in the daily newspapers, we selected six daily newspapers to be monitored. The newspapers that were monitored for this purpose were the following: Shekulli, Panorama, Gazeta Shqiptare, Shqip, Standard, Albania.

Newspaper circulation in Albania is not made public and there are no alternative ways of controlling this figure. In addition, the number of sales of newspapers is even less known, as there is no obligation to report this figure, except for to tax collecting bodies, which see this figure as privileged information. For this reason, the selection of newspapers to be monitored was made having in mind the general perception in the media community on this issue, as well the feedback received by newspapers editors and directors. The aim was to select the newspapers with the highest number of sales and circulation, which is supposed to translate also in a greater influence on the public. However, lacking the verification tools for this criterion, we used alternative methods that led to this selection of newspapers.

The monitoring period of these newspapers has been the month of September, 1-30. This month was considered the most appropriate for monitoring this topic, due to the fact that September has traditionally marked the start of the new academic year and consequently this is the month when coverage of education reaches its peak in daily newspapers, for elementary, secondary, and high schools. The preparations for academic year of universities also start in this month. Hence, we considered this period as the most

convenient one to monitor for education, in order to have as accurate idea of the way it is covered as possible.

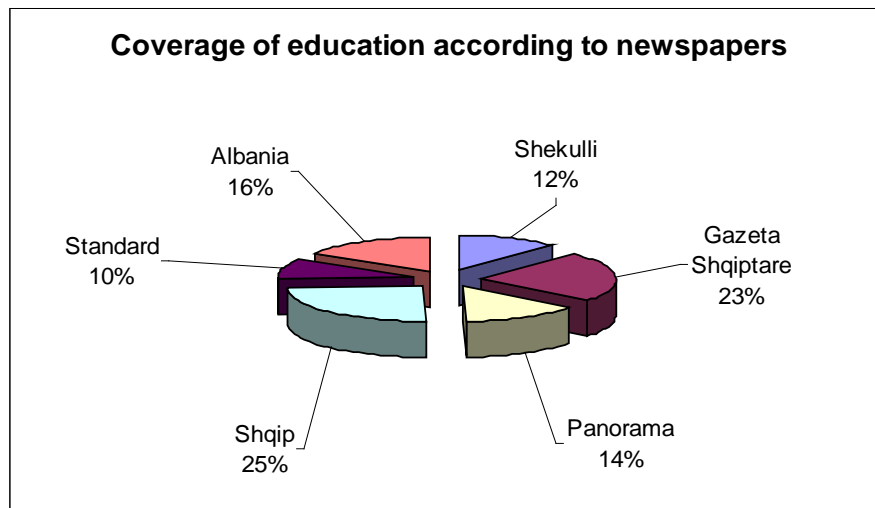
Monitoring was both quantitative and qualitative. From the quantitative point of view the monitoring focused on the total number of articles, the division of articles according to different topics, the general space devoted to education in the newspapers compared to other topics, the position of these articles in the newspaper, etc. From the qualitative point of view, the analysis focused on the topics addressed, on the sources of information used, the coverage of education trends and development, the infrastructure problems, the diversity of information sources, etc. Hence, the main aim of this monitoring was to conclude where the daily newspapers stand in respect to their public mission in informing on education development in the country.

### Quantitative monitoring

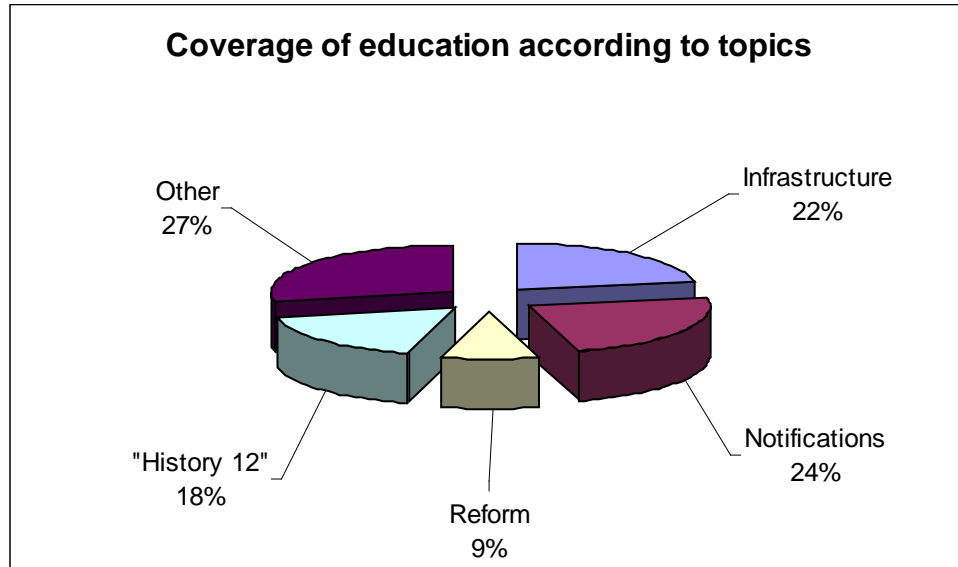
The analysis of monitored articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The total number of monitored articles is 433 articles for all six newspapers. The monitored articles did not include just news, but also editorials, features, brief news, etc. The length of articles varied from two paragraphs to a whole newspaper page, depending on the news it covered.

No.	Newspaper	Number of articles
1	Shekulli	53
2	Gazeta Shqiptare	101
3	Panorama	60
4	Shqip	107
5	Standard	42
6	Albania	70
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>433</b>

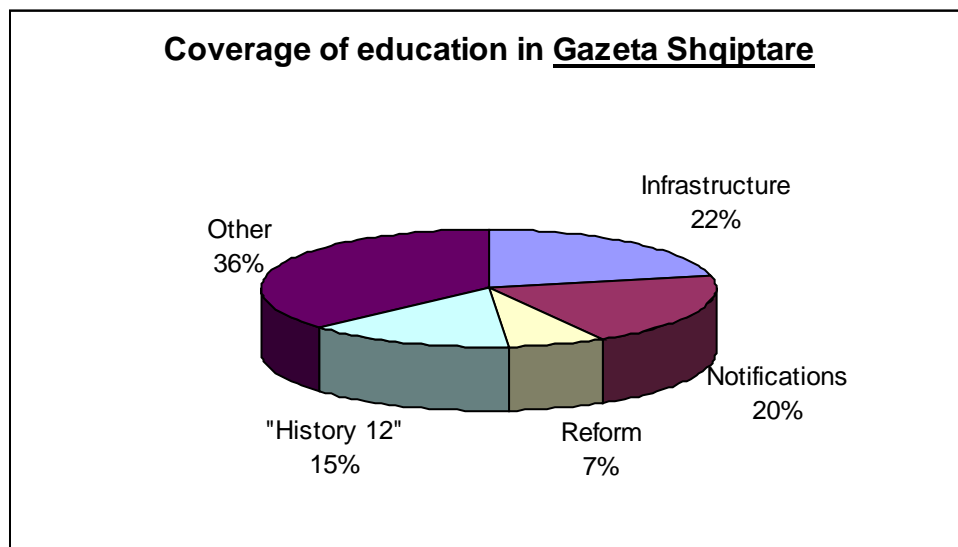
The following chart shows the percentage of articles each newspaper has from the total number of articles on education for this month:



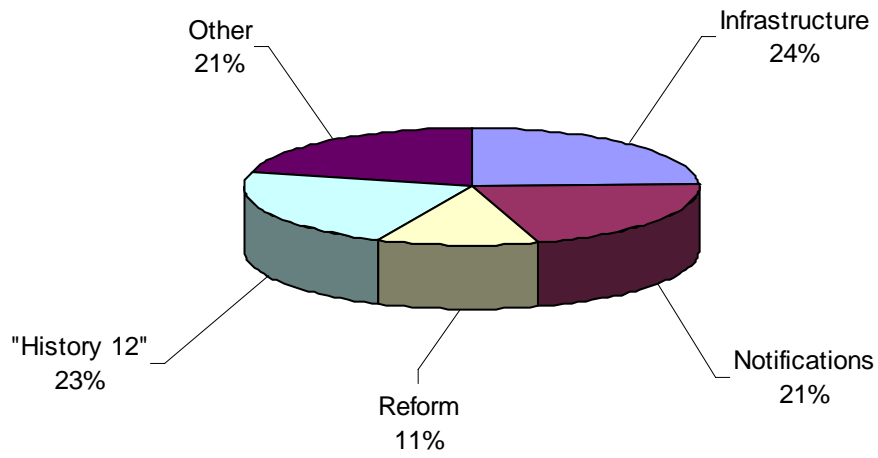
The main topics and the kinds of articles that were identified included school infrastructure, the notifications on the new academic year or different procedures related to education, education reform, the debate on the textbook “Historia 12”, as well as other events or articles that could not be grouped in a specific category. The division of coverage according to these topics is presented in the following chart:



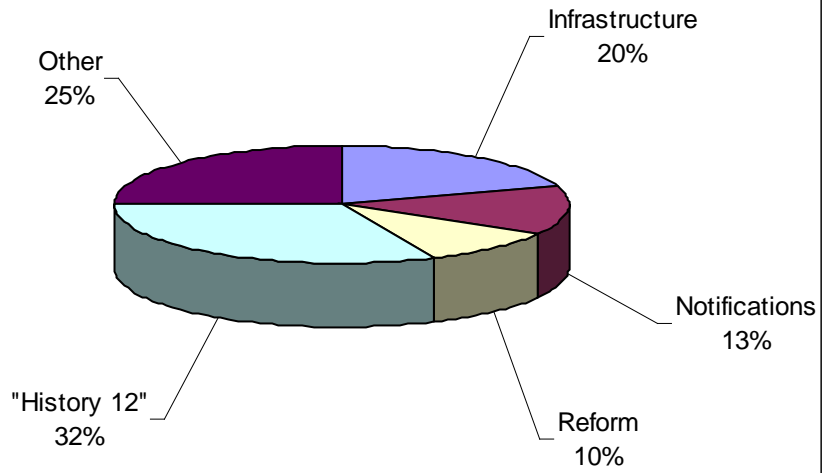
In order to have a clearer idea of what is the weight that each newspaper has carried in covering these topics, the following charts depict in detail the division in percentages for each topic, in each monitored newspaper:



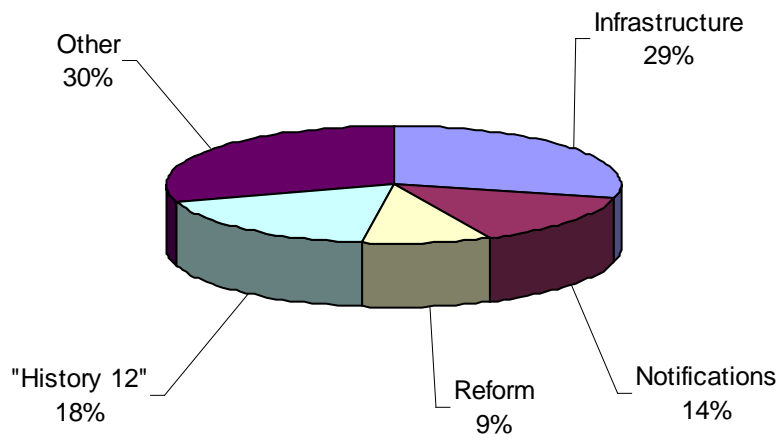
### Coverage of education in Shekulli



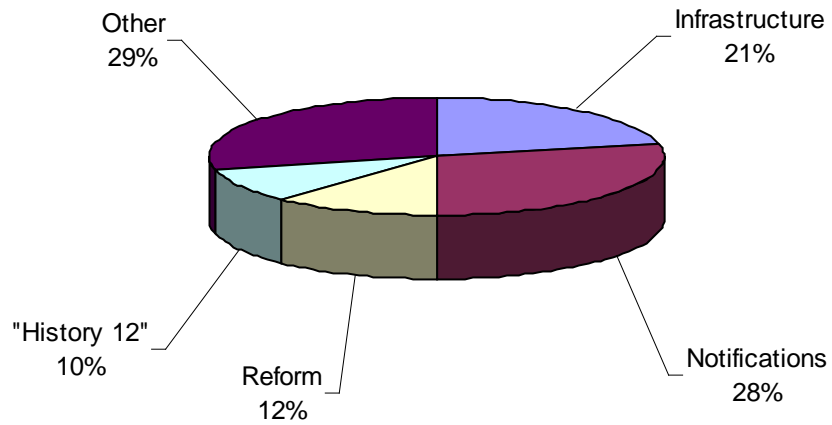
### Coverage of education in Panorama



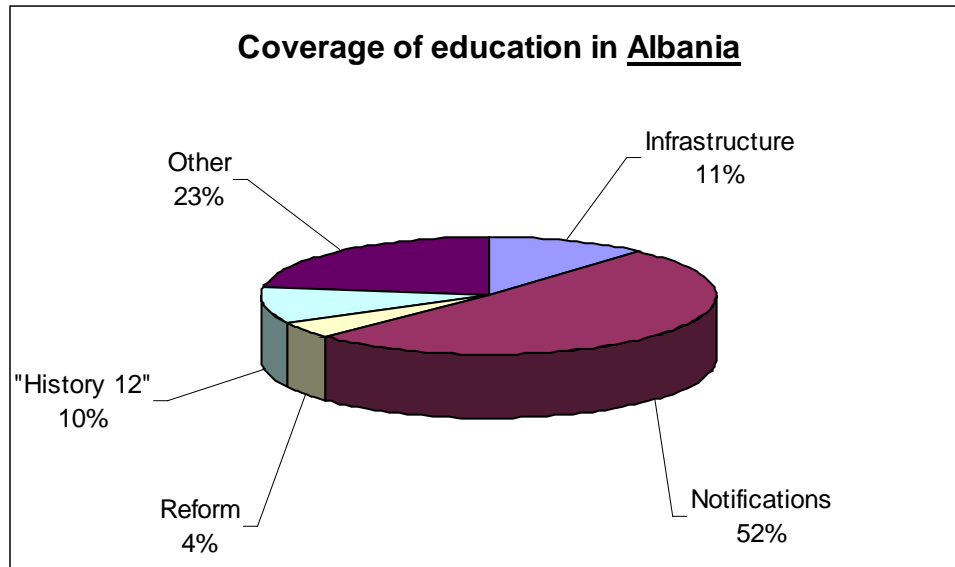
### Coverage of education in Shqip



### Coverage of education in Standard







### **Qualitative monitoring**

From the qualitative point of view, the monitoring on the coverage of education issues has presented a diversity of topics related to this area. Unlike other social issues, which seem to suffer from some limitation or reduction of topics as covered in the newspapers, education seems to enjoy a greater diversity of aspects and topics, even though the way these are represented is debatable and different from one newspaper to the next.

In this aspect, the topics that have been addressed by the daily newspapers in the most important month for education in the country include the infrastructure and institutions, the changes in curricula, the problems with texts, the problems of autonomies of universities, the problems with diplomas for some students, such services as registration or offers on new degrees and branches, health problems in the context of wine flu, education reform and its impact on teachers, the debate on a history textbook, relations teacher-students, etc

As it can be seen, there is an abundance, of topics, aspects and angles in the rather broad area of education, which Albanian newspapers have attempted to address in September 2009. Even though at first sight this bears well for the seriousness and work of newspapers in conveying the most important aspects of education development in the country, a closer look of the most important and widespread topics would be useful in order to discover the main trends and problems in the ways that newspapers cover education.

#### **➤ Coverage of services in education**

It is safe to say that the information on procedures, documents, dates, fees, admission quotas, test results, or any other useful information for students, parents or other interested actors has not been missing in the pages of Albanian dailies. In fact, the so-

called topic of “services” that are offered in the area of education is perhaps the most widely explored in September compared to other topics.

In general this topic has been addressed in full, in detail, including all information deemed necessary. There is information on the diplomas that will be issued or that have been issued, on the registrations for the new academic year, on the tests that need to be taken, on the competitions on admission, on dorm registration, etc. The following paragraph provides an example of such service:

“Guideline no.21, date 30 July, 2009, details all the procedures that the interested parties need to carry out in order to carry on with their Ph.D. So, according to Ministry of Education guideline, signed by Minister Fatos Beja, admission of candidates to the Ph.D. study programs will take place referring to the quota provided for the respective program in each university. ...The winning candidates have to pay a fee of 50 thousand ALL for registering in the study program where they have been admitted. The individual file for the rejected applicants is returned to them upon request.”<sup>29</sup>

Another example is related to the procedure of registration of students in universities, where, it is said, among others, that the secretariat office will be opened from 08.00 to 16.00 and that the documents needed are the following<sup>30</sup>:

- a) Original high school diploma and in its absence a transcript with photo, signed by the headmaster and the director of respective Regional Education Directorate.
- b) Identification document (ID, or passport) and photocopies. Only the photocopy of the ID is retained in the file.
- c) 2 photos.
- d) Receipt of payment of the registration fee of 1.500 ALL (Account No. of the payment must be requested in the respective university).

Something else that can be said on the numerous articles that belong to this category is that they are distinguished by a rather formal language, even though the important information is carried through to the students. In fact, this is a category of articles where it is impossible to distinguish one newspaper from the other. This is also because there seems to be a trend to publish the official notifications or decisions of universities, educational directorate, ministries, or other respective bodies unchanged. For example:

#### Guideline on “Diploma Supplement”<sup>31</sup>

1. The diplomas issued by Higher Education institutions at the end of the cycle of first, second, integrated study period, as well as of the programs of Secondary Level Master, must be accompanied by the Diploma Supplement.
2. The diploma supplement does not replace the diploma that is issued upon completion of the program.

---

<sup>29</sup> “MASH-i përcakton procedurat e reja sipas sistemit të Bolonjës,” *Albania*, 17 September 2009, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> “Universitetet, studentët fitues regjistrimet javën e ardhshme,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 12 September 2009, p.10.

<sup>31</sup> “Udhëzimi për ‘Suplementin e diplomës,’” *Albania*, 18 September 2009, p. 15.

3. The diploma supplement describes the nature, level, content and results of studies completed by the diploma holder.
4. The content and shape of diploma supplement of each higher education institution is determined by the respective academic Senate, in accordance with the National Model of Diploma Supplement.

This detailed list goes on with other eight points. It is clear from the content, the language used and the points presented that rather than an article or piece of news, this information is a direct and unchanged publication of notifications issued by the respective bodies. As it was mentioned above, one can come across often such articles in this month in the daily newspapers. As much so as you have the impression that the space on education in these newspapers works more as a space at the disposal of state education bodies rather than as a space allotted news, analysis or to informing the public in relation to developments in this very important area. The very administrative-like language, the same format of these articles as that of official documents, the uniformity of these articles in all newspapers, all of these lead to think that this space is just a duplication of official notifications and there are no attempts to go beyond this information or to bring new information, which, perhaps, would be what the reader expects when going through the daily newspapers.

This kind of information certainly is very important to that part of the public that finds itself in the whirlpool of registrations, receiving diplomas or other actions of a bureaucratic nature. This is especially true for those persons that do not live in Tirana and that have to come to the capital to take care of these. However, the emerging question is that apart from a wider scale of dissemination of information, which media enjoys by its very nature, what is the difference of these articles from the simple notifications posted in universities or other educational bodies? What is the difference in this respect between media and educational state functions? Is it really the role of newspapers and media to convey this information to the public?

#### ➤ **Education infrastructure in daily newspapers**

The topic of infrastructure of schools and in general the practical problems of the start of the academic year is a topic that is never absent in Albanian daily newspapers in this period. In fact, it perhaps can be said that when covering education through the years, this is the most common topic as compared to other topics even though this year the services offered in education has also been a rather frequent topic. Most of the articles on this topic are related to the absence of appropriate conditions in schools and kindergartens, as well as to other problems, related or not to the school.

In addition, when we talk of education coverage, we should also mention that the coverage of problems, especially in relation to infrastructure, has experienced a continuous improvement, covering an increasingly greater geographic area. While the range of problems is similar to last year (problems with buildings or school infrastructure, textbooks, relations teacher-student, etc.,) this year a greater diversity of topics is noticed in terms of geographical area covered. For example, if we consider the coverage of newspapers only for infrastructure problems, some of the titles that we come across are

the following: “Burrel, problems in the start of the academic year,”<sup>32</sup> “Korçë, two schools, teaching in shifts,”<sup>33</sup> “Berat, academic year, 30 schools need reconstruction,”<sup>34</sup> “Fier, hygiene? ‘Schools are terrible,’”<sup>35</sup> “Dibër, textbook distribution has not started yet,”<sup>36</sup> “Elbasan, 5 schools are closed,”<sup>37</sup> “Out of order, four schools are closed in the district of Fier,”<sup>38</sup> “Gjirokastrë, three schools are shut down,”<sup>39</sup> “School dropout, Task-Force starts to inspect 9-grade schools,”<sup>40</sup> “Gjirokastrë, shutting-down of schools, 50 pupils will not go to school,”<sup>41</sup> “Elbasan, textbook distribution, the main texts are missing,”<sup>42</sup> “Gjirokastrë, four schools risk to close down,”<sup>43</sup> etc. Also, it should be said that the coverage of the problems has not been made only on the first day of school, as it usually happens, but it has continued through the month.

Some newspapers, especially “Gazeta Shqiptare,” have lent an even more local aspect to the coverage of problems with infrastructure in education at the start of the academic year. In its section “Gazeta e Tiranës,” this newspaper has brought problems related to infrastructure according to the mini-municipalities of the capital, providing a fuller view of this aspect of education, but in a more specific angle, and targeting especially the public in the capital. For example, one of the articles<sup>44</sup> focuses on the construction of new nurseries, which is a worrying problem for the public. After providing an overview of the new projects on the reconstruction or construction of nurseries, the article also provides the location of these nurseries, as well as a list of reconstructions made through the years, conveying to the public information that is necessary. The same angle has been used in relation to schools.

### ➤ Coverage of complex aspects of education reforms

Education is one of the areas that has experienced among the most rapid changes and reforms in Albania. This reform is a continuous one, both in the area of public education and private one. To what extent is the public informed by the media on progress of these reforms, especially from daily newspapers?

In fact, the different facets and aspects of the education reform constitute a topic that is covered in daily newspapers. Undoubtedly, the frequency of coverage and follow-up of this topic need to be improved. The quality of reform coverage is another aspect that needs improvement.

---

<sup>32</sup> Shqip, 16 September 2009, p.25.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Shqip, 8 September 2009, p.24.

<sup>35</sup> Shqip, 6 September 2009, p.24.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Panorama, 7 September 2009, p.11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Panorama, 9 September 2009, p.17.

<sup>40</sup> Gazeta Shqiptare, 30 September 2009, p.14.

<sup>41</sup> Gazeta Shqiptare, 23 September 2009, p.24.

<sup>42</sup> Shekulli, 9 September 2009, p.10.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> “Gati projektet për ndërtimin e tri çerdheve të reja,” Gazeta Shqiptare, 21 September 2009, p.10.

In order to analyze more in-depth the quality of coverage of this key topic for the future development of education, it would be necessary to have a closer look at the articles written in this period precisely on this topic. The main aspects or events that have led to articles on different education reform aspects have included teacher qualification,, scientific research as a requirement, opening of pre-school classes for children, accreditation process of University of Tirana and in general the schools' accreditation process, the requirement of having a master's degree and knowing a foreign language for the teachers, etc.

More specifically, the coverage of the reform for the qualification of teachers consists in the coverage of the statements of the Minister of Education, who stated that teachers should undergo a series of qualifications:

“In 2013 there will no longer be teachers those who do not possess the basic knowledge of the subject matter, who have not furthered their studies through a master's degree; there can be no teachers that work with students that are in contact with computer and English, if the teachers are not able to use the technology and know a foreign language at a sufficient level.”<sup>45</sup>

This was a statement published by all newspapers and each newspapers sufficed itself with the mere publication of the statement. This is a reform that at first sight seems a rather positive one, as it aims to improve teachers' qualification and hence improve teaching and quality of education in general. However, the mere publication of this statement in newspapers is a shallow and insufficient coverage of the reform. This statement leads to numerous other questions: What will be the modalities of the reform? Are four years sufficient for such a significant reform? Can the teachers meet this requirement, especially the oldest ones? What do education experts think of this reform? Hence, none of these questions is further addressed by the newspapers, leaving the coverage of this reform only in this one-sided statement, with no additional information and no reaction from other actors involved in or affected by this reform.

A similar phenomenon and coverage is noticeable for other topics related to differed education reforms. Almost all newspapers mentioned as a novelty of the academic year the opening of 50 preparatory classes for pre-school children, aged 5-6<sup>46</sup>. However, each one of the newspapers only publishes this as a point in a list of notifications made by Ministry of Education at the start of the academic year. Where will these classes be? What is the purpose? What will happen to this pilot project? Again, these are questions that do not get any answer.

Another piece of news was related to the granting of scholarships for those high school students that decide to attend professional schools.<sup>47</sup> Having in mind the very low attendance of professional schools and the crowded general higher education brands, which leads to increasingly less qualified craftsman and professionals in specific technical areas, this is a measure that was taken in order to promote professional

---

<sup>45</sup> “Reforma, asnjë mësues pa master dhe gjuhë të huaj,” *Shekulli*, 20 September 2009, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> “Risja, 50 klasa përgatitore për fëmijët parashkollorë,” *Shqip*, 4 September 2009, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> “Bursa kush ndjek profesionale,” *Panorama*, 9 September 2009, p. 18.

education. Even though this seems to be an important step and naturally, it is meant to have a significant impact on the aspect of further professionalization, only one of the newspapers has addressed this topic. Even this coverage was not a thorough one. In fact, this topic, the abandoning of professional education in favor of a more general education, is gradually creating problems with the labor market and services in general and is an essential problem in the array of challenges that education faces currently. However, this is a topic that usually is absent in our newspapers.

There are attempts to fill this void mainly through editorials by analysts, politicians, or education experts. These articles have addressed different topics, including proposals for a qualitative reform in education<sup>48</sup>, the debate on autonomy of universities in the context of disobedience of the dean of University of Vlora,<sup>49</sup> political influence and debate on the textbook “Historia 12,”<sup>50</sup> a satire on given aspects and abuses of current education,<sup>51</sup> positive discrimination of poor rural mountainous areas in relation to education,<sup>52</sup> and some even address new topics such as media literacy, a topic that our education system will have to deal with soon.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, even though the editorials in general in Albanian newspapers tend to focus on politics, this month there have been several editorials on education, even though a wider participation and debate is always desirable. Precisely this relatively high number of editorials and the wide array of topics on education developments witness to the interest and significance assigned to or needed for this topic in the country and in media especially.

### ➤ **“Historia 12” textbook and the ensuing debate**

One of the most intense and widely covered debates at the beginning of the academic year was related to the controversy on the history textbook of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, on history of Albania. Due to the nature of the controversy, this textbook was expected to attract reactions from all political wings, as the objectivity of the historians that had drafted the textbook, and consequently the quality of the text itself was at stakes.

The publication of this textbook caused immediate and severe reactions from numerous actors. Since the main problem was thought to be favoring one political wing in this text and wrong presentation of historical facts, the most severe reactions came from Socialist Party. All of these reactions have been present in the newspapers and it must be said that coverage of this topic has been balanced in most of the cases. The newspapers have conveyed statements from the Socialist Party, from the Ministry of Education, the Prime Minister, and the authors of the text. Also, the opinions of experts, historians, or veteran personalities in politics have been included in the articles. Even the statements that have

---

<sup>48</sup> Ermelinda Meksi, “Për një arsim sa më cilësor,” *Shqip*, 26 September 2009, p.8.

<sup>49</sup> Ilir Yzeiri, “Rektori Shaska na fton të hapim sytë,” *Shqip*, 28 September 2009, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Artan Fuga, “Rrufe politike mbi një tekst shkolle,” *Standard*, 26 September 2009, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Lutfi Dervishi, “Dhe dritë e diturisë përpara do na shpjerë...” *Shqip*, 24 September 2009, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Besnik Bekteshi, “Disa drejtime të diskriminimit pozitiv të zonave malore të varfra në fushën e arsimit,” *Standard*, 11 September 2009, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> “Edukimi dixhital,” *Standard*, 5 September 2009, p. 17.

been taken from students in “Çajupi” high school, who staged a strong protest against this textbook, have been balanced against the statements of the school headmaster, who proposed severe measures against this protest.

Although most of the newspapers had a balanced coverage of this topic, it must be said that there were also exceptions, albeit rare ones. So, one of the newspapers openly shows its opposition to this text:

“At least one of the authors of this book, Mr. Beqir Meta, is simply ‘seized’ in a conflict of interest. This is due to the fact that he is currently deputy director of the Center of Albanological Studies, an institution where appointments are made by Mr. Berisha’s government, the salaries are determined by Mr. Berisha’s government, the remunerations for ‘a good job’ are also determined by the same government. This is an intertwining of interests that is the envy even of high-school graduates in Lybia, who are inspired to this day from the books on their leader, Ghedaffi.”<sup>54</sup>

Another example on the same line:

“Historians? Even amateurs or students would do a better job with this text. Not only are they politicized to the core, but they do not even have the minimal memory of the important events that have happened just in the last two decades. Although they possess scientific degrees, they allow themselves to make such big blunders ...The textbook that covers the years 1997-2006 is not only inaccurate, but also manipulated.”<sup>55</sup>

This paragraph clearly shows not just the problems that emerged with this text, but apparently also the opinion of the journalist or the newspaper on this text. Even though it is clear and it was also accepted by the ministry that this was a problematic textbook in some aspects and it would eventually be corrected, it is not appropriate and not in accordance with professional criteria for the journalist to express his own opinion in an article that is not an editorial or opinion piece. However, this was an isolated case in the prism of balancing the political viewpoints and positions.

An element that all newspapers have in common regarding the coverage of this topic is that none of the newspapers goes more in-depth. While the newspapers rushed to get statements from historians or historical figures of the last 20 years, and they represented every possible statement of political parties or government, there were not articles dealing with the essence of the problem: the methodological errors involved. Only an interview with the historian and researcher Arben Puto addressed this problem, where the person in question stresses the methodological problem in drafting this text:

“It is not recommended that history is written while events are still happening. Historians have to apply a principle called objective distance, which, if not applied, leads to losing your objectivity.’ Referring to the fact that it is impossible for contemporary history to use archive documents, in view of the law on exploitation of archive sources, but also because we are dealing with recent events and characters that are still alive in the political and social life of the country, the historian is against treatment of this period in

---

<sup>54</sup> “Teksti shkollor, dje Enveri, sot Berisha, bij të Historisë,” *Albania*, 23 September 2009, p.3.

<sup>55</sup> “Berisha çeli një epokë të re për vendin në 2005,” *Shekulli*, 23 September 2009, p. 2.

the textbook. ‘Historians should only rely on accurate and authentic sources and not just on the press,’ - says Puto.”

Hence, this interview, in the array of opinions from experts in all newspapers, is the only one that comes closer to the essence of the problem. In spite of the wide and sometimes intense coverage of this topic, most of newspapers have been trapped in the balanced politicized coverage of this topic, which seems to be the fate of most debates that emerge in the country and that are covered in press.

### ➤ **The social aspect and frequency of coverage of education issues**

While most problems addressed in relation to infrastructure, high expenses for parents, the absence of textbooks, etc., are familiar to the reader almost every new academic year, there were also other topics which the newspapers rarely address. Such topics include the topic of children that are locked in due to blood feud, the difficulties of poor kids, the lack of textbooks, the abandonment of public education in favor of private education, etc. These topics in general attempt to bring a human angle and a less administrative one of the developments in education, while at the same time addressing the main problems encountered in this area.

In this aspect, special attention can be paid to the supplement “Sociale”<sup>56</sup> published in “Gazeta Shqiptare.” In general this weekly supplement conveys to the reader a broad range of social topics, but in the framework of monitoring education, the publication of this supplements offers a window on some problems affecting different age groups in education and brings diverse aspects related to education through interviews, statistics, studies, and portraits. So, this supplement addresses such topics of public interest as the low number of public gardens in the capital<sup>57</sup>, the heavy illiteracy among Roma children<sup>58</sup>, the special classes for children that did not attend kindergarten<sup>59</sup>, but it also has some portraits of people involved in education, such as a veteran teacher<sup>60</sup>, working for 35 years at the same school, or the kid that goes to school for the first time<sup>61</sup>. In this aspect, this supplement brings a fresher note and a wider, more diverse and more human view of different aspects in the broad area of education.

### ➤ **The supplement “Gjinnazistët”: the other side of education**

A practice that has started in the recent years has been the initiative of “Gazeta Shqiptare,” consisting in the publication of a weekly supplement targeting only high school students. During the whole academic year, once per week, the supplement focuses only on what happens in high schools of the capital, allowing for a space only for this group, which rarely has the possibility to voice its opinion in print media. Furthermore, unlike any other space covering minors, the high school students can also write

---

<sup>56</sup> “Suplementi ‘Sociale,’” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 17 September 2009, p. 17-20.

<sup>57</sup> “Tirana: më pak kopshte publike se në kohën e Enverit,” Suplementi “Sociale.”

<sup>58</sup> “Komuniteti rom, 1000 analfabetë,” Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Klasa speciale për fëmijët që s’bënë kopsht,” Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “Shkolla ‘1 qershori’, shtëpia ime e dytë,” Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Unë, Valerio, inxhinieri i ardhshëm,” Ibid.



themselves in this space, as it often happens, instead of just communicating through journalists interviewing them.

The supplements describe mainly the daily problems of high school students, including the problems with infrastructure at schools, the challenges that education faces, extracurricular activities, the clash between generations, relations teacher-students, and even lifestyle of this generation. So, some of the titles we find in the supplements include: “Historia 12: the book that divided the high schools,” “High school students, knives instead of books,” “High school students, party for the benefit of school,” “High schools in chaos, everybody wants to go to central schools,” etc.

Hence, as it can be noticed from the titles, the content of these articles in these supplements is rather diverse and attempts to provide as full an overview of the problems of this group as possible. In addition, the supplements allow the students themselves to express their concerns. Frequently in these supplements you can also find explanatory letters of opinions signed by the entire class. Also, information on extracurricular activities, such as Internet pages built by the students, theatre plays, literary competitions, etc, is provided by the students. So, this space for high school students is not only exclusively for them and on them, but also brings their own optics in relation to the diverse problems and topics addressed.

In general, the publication of the supplement “Gjimnazistët” establishes a new practice and approach vis-à-vis groups that rarely find themselves a space in the newspapers. Combining journalistic approach and the opinions and voices of students, the supplement can bring a fuller and more diverse view on what this group faces at the moment. In addition, the regular frequency of publication of the supplement distinguishes it from other equally important supplements, but which are not published on a regular basis.

## **Conclusions**

In general, what can be said on the coverage of education in Albanian press is that there is a regular interest in this topic. Pieces on education are published almost daily. Even though, similarly to health, environment, or other topics, these articles are under the sector of the “social” page, it must be said that education is an almost daily topic, unlike other topics in the same page.

Regarding the quality of reporting, the attempts to cover events and especially services offered in education are visible. However, even though the reform in education is a key issue for Albanian society, reporting on it can be defined more as news reporting rather than regular follow-up reporting and analysis of the reform progress. Similarly to other social topics, coverage of the problem in education is limited to the news or the notification and rarely is elevated to a broad and educated public debate. The editorials fill this void up to a point, but newspapers themselves are not part of the debate.

Regarding the representation of all strata and groups affected by the education reforms and development, it must be said that dependence on official sources of information in

daily newspapers is obvious. Even though alternative voices are heard from time to time, this usually happens in cases of controversy. In addition, there is a very strong tendency to focus exclusively on public education. By sidestepping private education, which has become a significant reality that media needs to analyze, daily newspapers are failing to fulfill part of their obligation for reporting in accordance with public interest.

# **Monitoring poverty issues in Albanian print media**

## **Introduction**

Albanian media has usually covered poverty in a superficial way, even though poverty constitutes among the main challenges of Albanian society. The articles that analyze the causes of poverty, its profile, as well as the projects for reducing poverty in the country are rare. The UNDP Report on Human Development shows that about five percent of Albanians live in extreme poverty, with less than USD 1 per day. The same report states that poverty is rather widespread in rural and mountainous areas.

In addition, a characteristic trend of post-communist transition in Albania is the transition from a rural society to an urban one. In spite of the migration wave towards cities, the largest part of the population continues to live in rural areas. It is precisely this part of the population that continues to be unrepresented in Albanian media.

In this context, the main questions that will guide this monitoring will be: How much space is located to articles on poverty and rural areas in media? How is this phenomenon addressed, in a true, in-depth way, or in a sentimental manner? What are the main trends? Is this phenomenon analyzed sufficiently, or is it analyzed only when annual reports are due?

## **Methodology**

In order to examine the way that media covers poverty issues and identify the main trends and problems in this aspect in Albanian daily newspapers, six newspapers were selected to be monitored. These newspapers are: Shekulli, Panorama, Gazeta Shqiptare, Shqip, Standard, Albania.

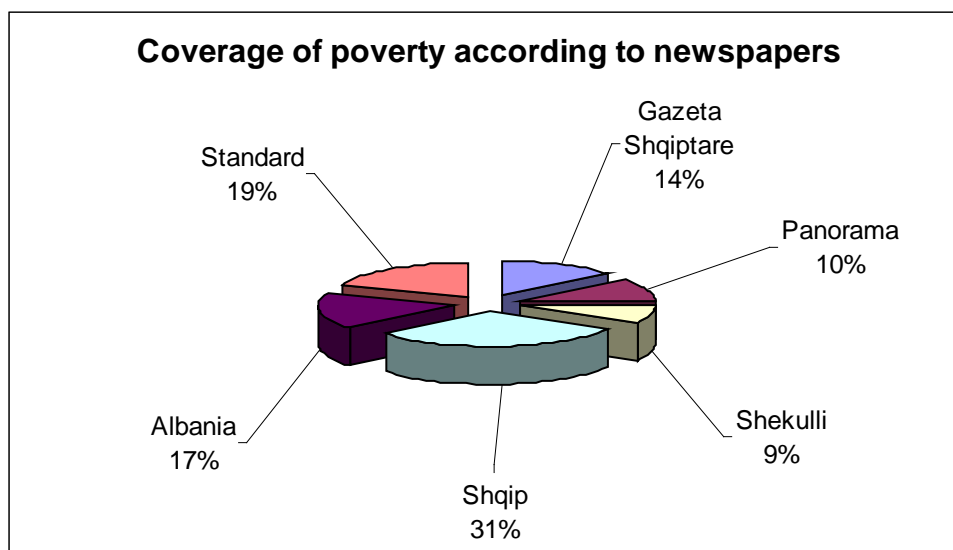
Newspaper circulation in Albania is not made public and there are no alternative ways of controlling this figure. In addition, the number of sales of newspapers is even less known, as there is no obligation to report this figure, except for tax collecting bodies, which see this figure as privileged information. For this reason, the selection of newspapers to be monitored was made having in mind the general perception in the media community on this issue, as well the feedback received by newspapers editors and directors. The aim was to select the newspapers with the highest number of sales and circulation, which is supposed to translate also in a greater influence on the public. However, lacking the verification tools for this criterion, we used alternative methods that led to this selection of newspapers.

The monitoring period of these newspapers has been the month of November, 1-30. Monitoring was both quantitative and qualitative. From the quantitative point of view the monitoring focused on the total number of articles, the division of articles according to different topics, the general space devoted to education in the newspapers compared to other topics, the position of these articles in the newspaper, etc. From the qualitative point of view, the analysis focused on the topics addressed, on the sources of information used, the coverage of education trends and development, the infrastructure problems, the diversity of information sources, etc. Hence, the main aim of this monitoring was to

conclude where the daily newspapers stand in respect to their public mission in informing on poverty issues in the country.

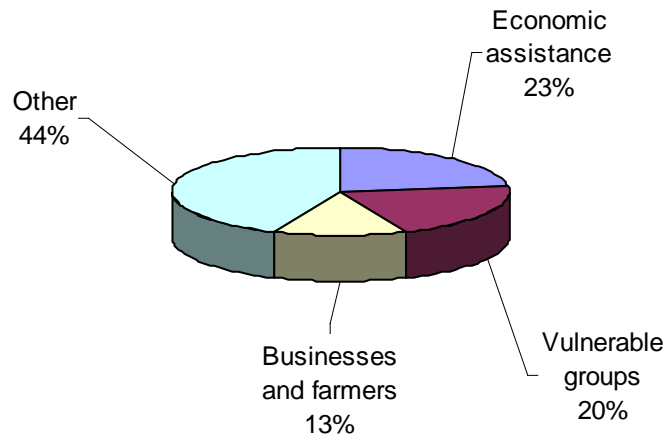
### Quantitative monitoring

Analysis of articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The total number of articles monitored was 69 articles for all six newspapers. The articles did not include just news, but also editorials, features, brief news, etc. It should be underlined that even though this is a topic that affects the life of a significant part of the population, this is the topic with the lowest number of articles as compared to other social issues monitored in this framework. In general the articles on this topic were brief, usually no more than half a newspaper page.



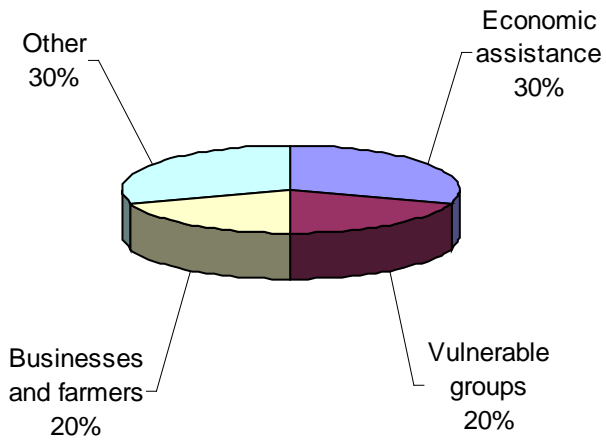
Based on the articles and issues that are addressed more often, the most frequently addressed topics during this month include financial assistance (social assistance system, social centers and changes in their system, changing of the provisions for social assistance, etc.) vulnerable groups (those isolated because of blood feud, the Roma minority, poor children, etc.) the challenges of businesses and farmers, as well as other topics that cannot be categorized in a specific category. The following chart represents the division of poverty issues according to the main topics identified during the monitoring:

### Coverage of poverty according to topics

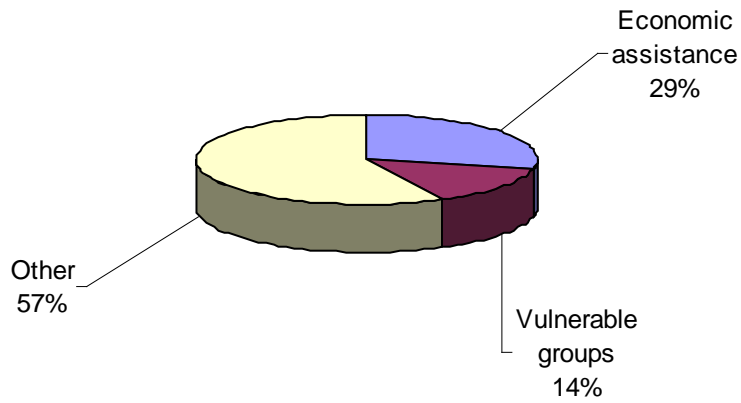


In order to see what has been the role of each newspaper in covering these main topics related to poverty, the following charts will be useful:

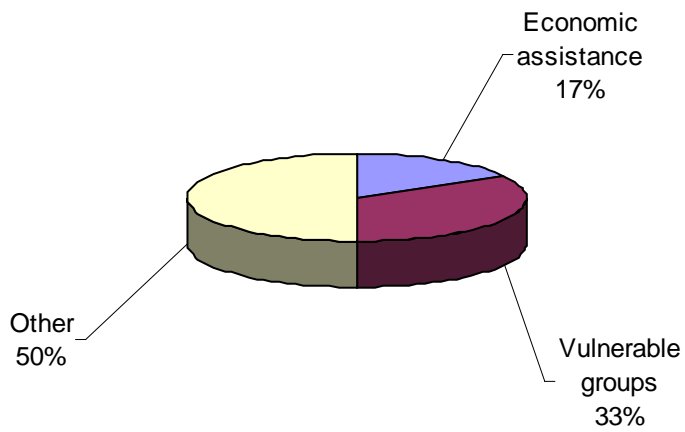
### Coverage according to topics in Gazeta Shqiptare



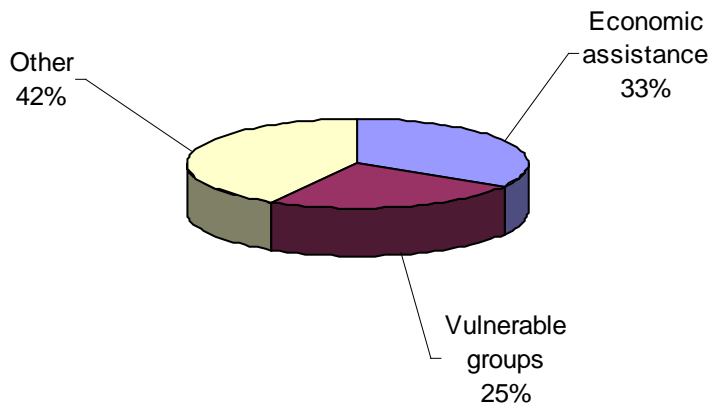
### Coverage according to topics in Panorama



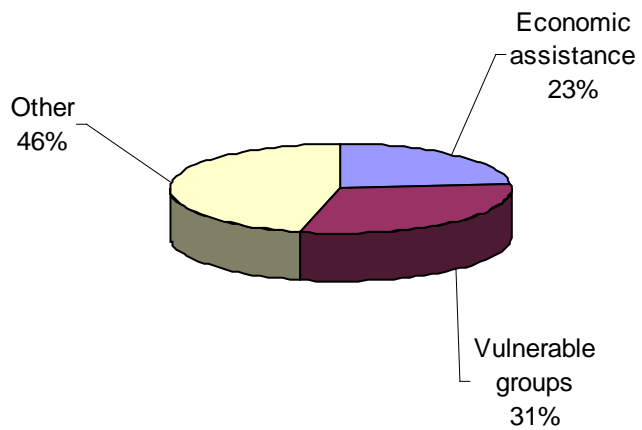
### Coverage according to topics in Shekulli



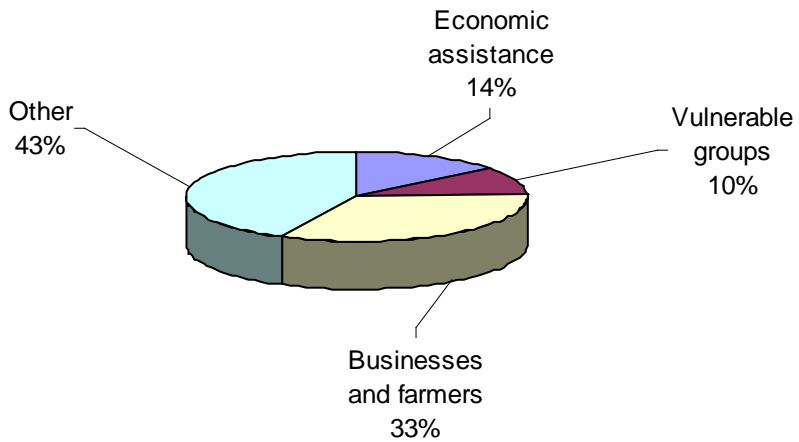
### Coverage according to topics in Albania



### Coverage according to topics in Standard



### Coverage according to topics in Shqip





## **Qualitative monitoring**

The main topics identified during the monitoring for these six newspapers have been diverse, even though the quantity was not significant. The topics can be divided in some categories, but the ones that are addressed most frequently are the different aspects of social assistance, the impact of the increase in electric energy, the situation of children in the anniversary of the UN Convention on Rights of Children, the situation of the Roma minority, the difficult situation of businesses in the context of the economic crisis, the challenges of Albanian farmers, the economic dimension of domestic violence, etc. Each of these topics has its own aspects and specifics, and, consequently, it has been addressed differently. In order to have a better idea of the way the poverty issues are addressed in the print media, a detailed analysis of each of these topics would be necessary.

### **- Social assistance**

The topic of social assistance has been perhaps the most complex one that has been addressed this month in the framework of poverty issues in Albanian newspaper. This topic has been the most complex one not so much for the approach used, but due to a greater diversity of developments as compared to other topics. So, there have been several sub-topics in this category, as the following list shows:

- The change of the payment in the system of social assistance;
- Absence of financial assistance for some groups (ex-employees of Albpetrol, teachers, a group of invalid persons in Mamurras,);
- Establishment of a control system for the people receiving social assistance;
- Increase of quotes for social centers;
- Sending of books to social centers;
- Expansion of vulnerable groups that will receive financial assistance;
- Easier bank loans for unemployed persons.

As it can be seen, there is a long list of topics covered in the framework of social assistance for vulnerable groups. How have these topics been addressed from the professional point of view, and, more importantly, has the public interest been the main criterion used in covering this topic?

For example, one of the developments of this month in relation to social assistance was related to information that the financial assistance scheme would be reformed. According to this information, there would be revisions of the social assistance scheme, in order to remove abusive persons that benefited from this scheme in an unfair manner.<sup>62</sup> While statistics in general, the safety of this system and other related systems, have been a problem and a continuous topic of debate, this can be considered important news and a reform, in a way. However, only two brief paragraphs have been devoted to this news and there is no other information on the way this system will change, what will be the procedures, how will it be secured that we have a scheme that corresponds to the true

---

<sup>62</sup> “Përfitimi ekonomik, skema do të riformohet,” *Shqip*, 17 November 2009, p. 22.

situation, when will these changes take place, what is the estimated number of abusers in the whole scheme, etc.

These and other questions do not receive an answer. In fact, the way that the article is presented, the administrative language used and the positive tone of the article, (which says that the work on this has started for a long time now, but in fact there is no information on the work done,) create the impression that the article is more similar to a press release of the Ministry of Labor rather than to a newspaper article. This impression grows stronger when seeing that the article next to this one<sup>63</sup> also is focused on the Minister of Labor, who has visited the annual book fair and has received promises of the publishers to send books and magazines to the social centers for the retired persons. Even though there is no doubt that this is good news, perhaps there is other news or information that have higher priority than the visit of the minister to the book fair. For example, the reader sees the promise made on social centers, while there is very little information on the way these centers work, on their number in the whole country, on who attends them, etc. Hence, these articles show a clear trend of the prevailing presence of public figures, which are also the only sources of information.

However, it must be said that it is not just high officials that become sources of information on poverty issues. In other cases, information also comes from private sources, such as banks. One of the articles focuses on the new policies of Tirana Bank on loan conditions for the unemployed:<sup>64</sup>

“According to the new policy, Tirana Bank enables the persons that have taken loans to pay only 30% of the interest of the loan, while the remaining part of the capital will be transferred at the end of the loan period and redistributed in the coming years. This will enable the clients to face the payment of the loan, which will be fixed for a year.”

What is not clear from this article is whether there will be interest on the interest that will not be paid during this year, or whether this will influence the duration of payment of the loan, or if this means that upon paying back the entire loan the client has paid even more than he was supposed to. In fact, similarly to the article mentioned previously, this article is more similar to a press release from the bank, which has been published without any further questions, interpretation, or even explanation for the interested readers. Finally, is it really a newspaper's role to publish such information, especially when considering that this is related to a unique bank and not by a group of banks or all of them?

Another aspect related to social assistance was related to the failure to pay social assistance for several groups, including Albpetrol employees. This matter has been addressed in two newspapers, in two different ways. One newspaper has addressed it from the government angle, represented by Minister Prifti, who states that the mistakes in calculations have caused this problem and that the sum will be paid within 2009.<sup>65</sup> As in

---

<sup>63</sup> “Libra dhe botime të reja për bibliotekat e qendrave sociale,” Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Tirana Bank” Politika të reja për ata kreditorë që janë të papunë,” *Shqip*, 3 November 2009, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> “Prifti: Punonjësit e larguar do të marrin pagesë brenda 2009,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 10 November 2009, p.

the previous cases, the official voice is the only one heard, while the other side is totally missing.

A different approach is offered by the other newspaper, which offers especially the voice and version of persons working still in ARMO and have not received their salaries for months. “- It is only us who work in our families and it is three months that our families have basic problems, like even securing our bread. We have small kids that go to school, - says one of the persons that drill petrol.”<sup>66</sup> The article also provides statistics on the number of employees in the enterprise and brings testimonies of workers that say they are afraid to speak because of pressure that they might lose their job.

Naturally, this article offers a more complete view of the difficult situation of these employees as compared to an official statement of a minister that makes a specific promise. This is also due to the fact that the article has been reported from the areas of Marinza and Patos, where the problem is, while the first article seems to be based on a press release. Furthermore, the reporting is done from the area and the interviews with employees provide an opportunity of representation and speaking for that part of the population that rarely has the chance to find a space for their own problems in the media.

#### - **The topic of failed businesses**

Another topic relatively well explored during this month has been the difficult situation of businesses in the country, where, according to some newspapers, many of them have gone bankrupt or are in the verge of doing so. This topic has been especially followed in one of the newspapers, which has followed up on this for several days, with reports from different cities in the country.

What is important to stress in the analysis of coverage of this topic is that the newspapers has followed-up on the matter and has been attentive to this problem, unlike other news, which usually end the day they are published. So, the first article<sup>67</sup> starts with alarming statements for the businesses in 2010, when the situation is expected to become worse. The article offers an overview of the difficulties of the business, putting them in a context that is also backed from official statistics: “The profit has fallen by 180 million Euro, as a consequence of consumption reduction ...The tax office has declared as bankrupt about 74 businesses in September, whereas the bank account and activity has been frozen for another 72 businesses.”

After several days, this problem has addressed in another article<sup>68</sup> based on information from Konfindustria, which, in the name of business interests, draws attention to the difficult situation of businesses in the country. Even though this is a group whose main interest is to represent the business and as such is directly interested on the potential state

---

<sup>66</sup> “Albpetrol, kredia e pashlyer lë punonjësit katër muaj pa rroga,” *Shqip*, 10 November 2009, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> “Krizë ‘mbyll’ tre mijë subjekte private,” *Shqip*, 14 November 2009, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> “Biznesi: Qeveria të marrë masa për krizën, situata mund të përkeqësohet,” *Shqip*, 16 November 2009, p. 6.

measures, this is one more voice among the sparse voices speaking on economic reporting in general and especially in reporting on poverty issues.

What is more important is that the newspaper has not sufficed itself with official data and business statements and has followed up on this matter by investigating the situation on field, focusing on the cities of Shkodra and Fier. “About 160 small businesses out of 570 in total have demanded removal from the register, due to bankruptcy in the local branches of tax collection. Only in the last two months, 31 requests have been filed.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, data from Fieri have also been reported: “In October 2009, about 22 large businesses have declared bankruptcy, who currently find themselves in the last stage of this process, in the court stage.”<sup>70</sup>

So, the treatment of this topic, apart from its follow-up on different levels, has also brought a greater diversity of voices and sources of information. These also include official statistics in the national level, the opinions of experts and representatives of the business, as well as the verification on field of the business situation in two of the largest cities in the country, in North and. Naturally, what is still missing in these sources of information is the side that seems not to be presented in general in reporting on poverty, the damaged side, in this case the failed businesses.

#### - **The situation of the Roma minority**

A population group that has traditionally been symbol of poverty and social exclusion is precisely the Roma minority. Among the articles related to poverty this month there is also a feature<sup>71</sup> on this minority. The very title of this article promises to describe the challenges of this group: “The troubles of a linguistic minority.” Does the article deliver on its promise?

The article comes from the area of Paskuqan, where the Roma population living there is celebrating the construction of a protective wall against the river that flooded the houses any time there was heavy rain. This wall was built in the framework of a Caritas project. Even though the article starts by describing the celebrations and joy in the Roma village on this development, the focus is swiftly transferred to Caritas representatives:

“Now [the wall] will stop houses from flooding, thanks to an investment from Albanian Caritas for them. ‘We have made a very small investment, 20,000 Euro for building this protective wall and restoring about 20 Roma houses,’ says the director of the Albanian Caritas, Albert Nikolla. It is a year now that this humanitarian association directs and assists this community with clothing, food, and house appliances. ‘We are doing this in order to show these people that they are not alone, but also because we want to draw the attention of institutions that they have to focus on their poverty. Caritas helps, but it cannot solve the problem of poverty in Albania, - adds Albert.”

---

<sup>69</sup> “Shkodër, mbyllet një e treta e bizneseve të vogla,” *Shqip*, 25 November 2009, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> “Fier, tetë biznese deklarojnë falimentin vetëm në një ditë,” *Ibid*.

<sup>71</sup> “Hallet e një minoriteti lingvistik,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 8 November 2009, p. 15.

So, even though the topics of the article is the poverty of the Roma community and in the end this project assists them in some way, the focus is again shifted on the benefactor and not on the minority, as the title of the article indicates. The reader understands something from the challenges this group faces, but the words come from the implementers of the project and not from them. These phrases go on below: “-The other project will be supported by the German Caritas, - he says and then he adds that this is related to the education of Roma children, and consists in the construction of centers that will serve to learning how to write the Roma language.”

In fact, the voice of the Roma minority is also present in this article, with more than one person speaking. However, if we have a close look at the citations and the way they have been described, we notice that instead of being spokespersons of their problems, the interviewed persons strengthen the existing stereotype on Roma. More specifically, it is very difficult to hear somebody complain on the difficult conditions or on the poverty, or even the ones that mention these problems, quickly stop and go on with the amusement or indifference. The only person mentioning the challenges is a woman with two sick kids, who describes her own problems:

“Miranda Sina tells that she lives there with two children, one of them a hemophiliac, and receives financial assistance from the state for ten years now. -I also give blood, - she adds with a tone of sadness, which seems to dissipate when she joins the Roma celebration with the others. Because now she also feels better, at least she has one less problem to worry. She says that the Roma community must be part of the state’s attention and problems, and the state should solve their economic and social problems they face every day.”

So, even though this woman leads a difficult life and speaks on her problems and even calls for help, the information is conveyed by emphasizing that at the end she is not worried or sad, as long as there is a fest. So, the reader gets the feeling or the opinion that as long as there is a celebration, the Roma have no problems, which is not a truthful depiction of the situation.

Along the same line of thought, another Roma woman is cited, who strengthens the existing stereotype on the Roma minority even more:

“Mother Drita tells me that ‘the Roma are free people, they want to have their own style, in clothing and in behaviors. -It is in our blood, we have the gift of singing and using the different musical instruments, we are people that like the music, songs, and dances. We like them and we also like the nature, which is why we prefer to live in the open air, even in tents.”

A positive aspect of the article is the fact that it also tries to provide statistics on a significant problem of the Roma minority, on the fact that most of them are not registered. The article also provides information on the financial assistance that the commune provides, but the Roma themselves have not been asked on a problem that on the first place, is their own problem. The ensuing question in relation to this article and other similar articles is whether we would be reading this article if Caritas had not

implemented this project? Apparently, the monitoring of this topic shows that there would be very few chances.

- **The situation of children in the anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children**

An event that this month was covered in almost all newspapers was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC.) In this occasion, most of the articles in the newspapers cited statements and releases from UNICEF and Amnesty International. The latter called on the Albanian government's attention to poverty as one of the main causes of suffering of children in the country.

While some newspapers simply covered the statements of these international organizations, with general statistics on the situation of children in the world, some others had applied a more specific approach on Albania. So, one of them, after a short summary of the essence of these two statements, has also provided information on the attempts being made in this aspect from the government and other organizations, with specific statistics: "About 43 daily services on a community bases have established for vulnerable group and it is estimated that about 10,417 children benefit from them directly."<sup>72</sup>

Another approach used in another daily newspaper is more loyal to the statements of UNICEF and Amnesty International, but also provides statistics from Albania that lead to a more concrete viewing of the problems: "According to the Survey on Measuring of Living Standard, 12, 4 % of all Albanians are considered poor and half of them are children. Only one in two kids has access to pre-school education. For Roma children, access to pre-school education is only 30%."<sup>73</sup>

Even though the problems related to poverty on children are addressed in these newspapers, these problems, again, are addressed in the framework of events organized by UNICEF or other organizations in the framework of the convention. So, we are still left with just news coverage, general overviews, publication of statements, and this is where newspaper and public attention on the problem terminates. For example, in spite of the shocking statements cited above, which state that half of poor people in the country are children, there are no follow-up articles in the next days on this issue. Human aspect aside, this is a very significant issue for the future of the society and as such, it is of particular public interest. However, the coverage of this issue remains in the framework of a specific event or statement.

- **The situation of farmers in the country**

It is now a well-known fact that poverty is more pronounced in rural areas. However, most of the topics and articles in daily print media, but also in electronic media, focus on urban areas and mainly in the capital. Exceptions to this norm in this monitoring are two

---

<sup>72</sup> "Qeveria, më shumë mbështetje për fëmijët në nevojë," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 21 November 2009, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> "Fëmijët shqiptarë, në vështirësi e të paarsimuar," *Shqip*, 22 November 2009, p. 22.

newspapers, which have reported on the economic challenges that farmers face at the moment, for a series of reasons.

Both these articles have focused on the difficult situation of farmers in the country in the prism of competition on imported goods. So, one newspaper focuses on the dramatic history of a farmer in Berat that decided to cut down his fruit trees, since they not only brought any profit, but he is immersed into debt because of them:

“The whole effort and investment in these seven years went in vain, since nobody thinks about our products, even though I have spent money and time to produce them’... According to him, the income from sales of products does not even cover the expenses, let alone meet the basic needs of his family.”<sup>74</sup>

The other article follows the same line, only this time with farmers that grow corn in the area of Shkodra. This journalist also has interviews a farmer that explains the problem and poverty he faces as a consequence of wrong policies, he claims:

“-The price of the imported corn is very low and the tons of corn we sell do not suffice even to pay the social security of one employee, - says Mark Gjoni, a farmer in the area. –Just to pay social security for one employee, which I am obliged to do, I have to sell 8 quintals of corn at 25 ALL/kg, as this is the price of the corn in the market.”<sup>75</sup>

Hence, these articles bring a very important problem, such as poverty in rural areas and the very future of a broad group of population, by telling the problem in the words of the people that are at stake, which rarely happens in the articles of this topic. In addition, the second article goes further, providing other data: “Farmers in Albania have in average one hectare of land per family, which makes it impossible to produce with competitive prices with neighboring countries, where the population owns larger farms and has a higher efficiency.”<sup>76</sup> However, even though the problem is exposed in a specific, clear, and satisfactory way, the end of the article raises even greater questions, as, according to the article, the Albanian government has said that it will confiscate lands that are not worked, while the farmers respond that the only reason they do not work in the lands is that there is no economic convenience in this. First, the inclusion of an official statement or interview with the official side on this very important issue for this group of the population, but not only for this group, would undoubtedly improve the article from the professional point of view. In addition, the last paragraph, said in a casual manner, raises very serious questions on the government policies on agriculture and poverty, on the assistance that can be provided for this group, on the future of the whole area, etc. Similarly to other articles of this category, this is the only coverage on this group or problem in the country, at least for this month.

#### - **Specific cases and the phenomenon**

---

<sup>74</sup> “Importi falimenton fermerët, nis prerja masive e pemëve frutore,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 1 November 2009, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> “Fermerët nuk shohin leverdi në mbjelljen e misrit,” *Shqip*, 2 November 2009, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

The topic of poverty is one of the most difficult ones to cover in the media. This is not just due to the fact that newspapers have difficulties finding cases that exemplify this topic, but because it is a topic whose importance cannot be conveyed just in figures. On the other hand, the use of specific cases affected by poverty can clarify the phenomenon and the problem even more, but it can also cause unnecessary hurting of the people affected by this problem. For this reason, the way that newspapers perform in this aspect, where poverty is a topic that needs to be addressed, but is also a challenge to cover, can be very telling of the professionalism of Albanian newspapers.

For example, one of the monitored articles<sup>77</sup> focused on the challenges of compensation for ex-persecuted people during communism and was based in an interview with such a person in Shkodra. Among others, this person expressed the difficulties encountered and said that he needed the money for his sick son and that is why he demanded them, at a time when the dragged process hindered him from returning to the USA, where he lived. This is the information conveyed to the public. While this man that faces bureaucratic obstacles is only one of the many persons facing this problem, this issue is addressed simply by putting a face and a voice to this group, but not by going beyond the specific case in question. How many persons should receive compensation? How many have received compensation so far? What is the explanation of the administration? Hence, as in many other cases, the coverage remains a human interest story and is not transformed in an in-depth story that provides a more complete approach to the problem.

Another example is an article<sup>78</sup> built like an interview with an activist against domestic violence. The interview partially links poverty as one of the main issues of domestic violence, saying that the women have no option of divorce, as they have no financial viability. In the context of Albanian society this is a very important topic and the approach used is a good one, as it rarely happens that such would be linked to and explained directly through poverty as one of the main causes. However, apart from this interview, which clearly indicates the role that the state must play in establishing the needed infrastructure for women that denounce domestic violence, there is no follow-up of the problem. There are no interviews with relevant state bodies, there are no statistics on this problem and there are no alternative opinions. So, eventually, in spite of the good will, it is really a luxury for Albanian newspapers to follow this approach in reporting these topics that present a serious public interest.

## **Conclusions**

In general it can be said that there is a relatively good sensitivity vis-à-vis poverty in print media. However, this topic is not a clear priority for the newspapers. At a time when specific news or cases related to this issue are covered almost daily, the attempts to present the whole phenomenon, in all its complexity, are not that visible.

In addition, official sources, private official sources or the third sector remain the prevailing sources of information, while the voices of persons really suffering the poverty

---

<sup>77</sup> “Të përndjekurit: Para nën dorë për dëmtshpërblimin,” Shekulli, 11 November 2009, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> “Gratë s’divorcohen, shkak kushtet ekonomike,” Gazeta Shqiptare, 19 November 2009, p. 18.



are rarely heard. On the other hand, daily newspapers often miss the completion of more in-depth analysis of the news or the phenomena. Even though poverty is a very serious issue that Albanian society faces, you cannot find sufficient information in Albanian media that reports on poverty as a source of or as a factor that assists in creation of other serious social problems (crime, alcoholism, prostitution, domestic violence, suicide, etc.).

**Policy paper  
on the coverage of social issues  
in Albanian print media**

## 1. Executive summary

Media has an especially important role in covering and including into the public debate the important issues for the society. There is no doubt that social issues must be an important part of this public debate. Albanian media has made visible progress and in some aspects even an impressive progress in its relatively short history.

However, as the whole Albanian society, most part of the media is still hostage to politics and influenced by politics. Excessive politicization of Albanian society is naturally reflected in the media and consequently on the public debate. Hence, public interest is not the main criterion in reporting and the public debate suffers shortcomings in some aspects and topics, including social issues in the media.

Based on the results from the monitoring reports in coverage of education, poverty, and health in the main daily newspapers, this policy paper aims to provide a summarized overview of the problems identified in reporting social issues, as well as potential suggestions for improving this reporting. Even though most of the recommendations are addressed to media outlets, part of them can and should be implemented by other bodies and actors that have to cooperate with the media in the framework of the public debate.

## 2. Media context in the country

Albanian media have gone through several development stages since the publication of the first newspapers after the dictatorship, *Rilindja Demokratike* in 1991. Unlike 1991, when there was just one opposition newspaper and one state television, now the country has an overcrowded commercial media market, both for print media and electronic one. For the moment the approximate number of media outlets in the country is about 255. This figure includes about 26 daily newspapers, 35 weekly publications and other print media of different periodicities. Apart from all these print media, there are also 68 local televisions, three national ones, 47 local radio and two national ones, as well as 50 cable TVs and the public television.

The role of the media in Albanian society is becoming increasingly important. Media has increasingly become a government watchdog and is being perceived as a useful tool for the development of different social sectors. For example, according to the latest surveys, in the eyes of the public opinion media is perceived in the first rank among the institutions fighting corruption, a trust in the media that has increased through the years.<sup>79</sup>

The professional level of journalists has improved through the years, even though the average age of employed journalists remains quite young. The latest data show that the prevailing age groups in the newsrooms of daily newspapers are 24-30 and 31-35 years old<sup>80</sup>, even though employment of journalism students remains a widespread practice in most media. Another typical trend of the media market in the country is its unstable labor market and the frequent change of jobs of journalists. This instability does not enable the

---

<sup>79</sup> IDRA, "Corruption in Albania: Perceptions and needs 2009," p.9.

<sup>80</sup> AMI, "Education of journalists in mainstream media," 2009, p. 9.

profilisation and specialization of a journalist on a particular beat or sector. According to the data collected in a survey, 67% of surveyed journalists said that they have covered more than one beat during their career.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, in the last years there have been significant efforts to train journalists on professional skills and some topical reporting aspects, such as political reporting, human rights reporting, economic reporting, etc.. Topics such as reporting on poverty, agriculture, health, community, environment, children, civil society, education, etc, are less addressed. Even though this topic carry a great social significance and public interest, as they affect the whole society, the media addresses these topics less than other topics. Politics remains the prevailing topic in the Albanian media.

Along the same lines, even though the main problems in Albania are of a rural nature, the media insists in being urban, even in its reporting. Apart from being the administrative capital, Tirana is also the media capital, where all 26 daily newspapers are published and many other media are based. Very few local newspapers are published in other districts and regions, and usually not with a regular frequency. So, the mainstream media, based in Tirana, also has to cover problems in other areas of the country. However, experience has shown that even when the media reports on local or rural problems, the approach is usually urban.

### **3. The significance of social issues reporting in the media**

“Press freedom is a responsibility that journalists exert in the name of the public.”<sup>82</sup> For this reason, the media has a vital role in the democratic process, as conveyor of quality information for an education public debate. In the framework of this role, the media “is expected to be organized and behave according to the greater public interest or for the public good.”<sup>83</sup>

Information is power and being the holders and transmitters of information and opinion, this is a power that media possesses. Along with this power, media also has the responsibility to use the power in the public interest. The articles, programs or other media products immediately become part of the public debate and this is a responsibility that should be routine of the media work.

The role of independent and pluralistic media in fostering participation in the public debate is critical, since the media report on aspects of decision-making and enable the stakeholders to voice their opinion. However, Albania, as other countries in the region, can be defined as a regime where people are free to change their governments, but cannot yet change the policies. The role of Albanian media in this aspect has its own shortcomings.

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Mediawise, “Social Responsibility and the media,” available at [http://www.mediawise.org.uk/display\\_page.php?id=905](http://www.mediawise.org.uk/display_page.php?id=905)

<sup>83</sup> Denis McQuail, “Theory of massive communication,” p. 142.

Albanian society remains a politicized and polarized society. The topics related to politics prevail in the media debate. A more professional coverage of social issues would improve the debate in the country and would guide this debate towards the genuine problems that the society faces. In the words of Noah Webster: “Journalists are not just transmitters of what we call news; they are common instruments of social relations, through which the Citizens of this great Republic discuss and debate continuously with each other in relation to public interest issues.”<sup>84</sup>

#### **4. Reporting of social issues in the media**

##### **4.1. *The umbrella of the “social” page***

Such topics as health, poverty, education, agriculture, environment, etc., are of a great importance for the Albanian society, especially in a period of continuous transition and reforms. The role of the media in the accurate and qualitative coverage of these topics and in the enhancement of the public debate is essential.

The monitoring of these topics in the Albanian daily newspapers shows that there is not a well-defined page or sector for such important topics. Health, education, agriculture, environment, poverty, children’s rights, and other topics, in most cases are located in the newspapers under a big umbrella that is the page labeled as “social.” Depending on the day and the news, this sector of newspapers varies from one to three or four pages. Meanwhile, most of the newspapers have at least two regular and clearly-defined pages on politics and 1-2 pages on crime and court reporting.

In this context, the criterion of the public interest is the most important test on the quality of information: for example, does the reader care more about reading on the latest clash of the government with the opposition, or whether a certain hospital is able now to do analysis that earlier the reader could only travel abroad to complete? Is it more important to know on the details of a certain domestic crime, no matter how hateful it is, or know which schools are accredited, so that you make a good choice for your children?

Judging from the practice of newspapers so far, public interest has leaned more on the side of politics and to a degree to crime and court reporting. Even though the public should be informed on everything and no one can deny the importance of these topics, this choice seems to be made at the expense of social topics, which are topics that affect all of us sooner or later.

##### **4.2 Politicization of social problems**

It is difficult to deny the high degree of politicization of Albanian society, in every area. Naturally, even in the media political influence is unavoidable. The fact that the political pages are the first pages when you leaf through a newspaper and that they occupy the

---

<sup>84</sup> Noah Webster, cited in Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel, “The elements of journalism,” p. 198.

largest space, along with the large number of television political programs, testifies to this trend.

Unfortunately, this influence is easy to notice even in media reports on social issues. There are frequent cases when topics of social importance are sidestepped or become part of the debate only through their politicization. The clearest example in the framework of this monitoring is that of the textbook “Historia 12,” which, due to the political battle it sparked, led to some newspapers devoting 1/3 of articles on education in that month just to the debate on this textbook, neglecting other important topics related to reform in education.

If political spark or charge is a necessary element in order to draw media attention, then it is clear that public interest in these media is either neglected or misunderstood. The application of the criterion of political significance in order to assign the priority of an article certainly veers the media away from its mission vis-à-vis the public and itself.

### **4.3 Alternative sources of information as an unexplored alternative**

In principle, the main public for the media is society and all its groups. Consequently, it is part of the media duties to not just inform on what is being done for them or what will affect their lives, but also include them in the public debate. Only in this way there would be an exchange of opinions that would lead to a healthy and well-informed public debate.

In this context, regarding the representation of all strata and groups affected by developments in areas such as education, health, agriculture, economics, or other areas of social significance, it should be said that dependence on official sources of information in daily newspapers is obvious. There are also cases when alternative voices are included, but these are rare.

The monitored articles in the framework of social issues in the media show that most of them are based in only one source and there are good chances for this source to be an official one. This trend also includes the extremely loyal publication in the media of official statements, press releases, or notifications, where it is difficult to distinguish whether such an article is from a journalist or from a press office.

Part of the articles on social topics, especially on education, but also in other areas, seems to have assumed also the duty of informing the public on issues such as test dates, distribution of rooms in dorms, test grades, etc. Even though this information might be useful, these areas have much more serious problems that need media attention in order to become part of the public debate.

### **4.4 News versus phenomena**

Even though there is a relatively satisfactory and diverse coverage of what can be considered as news or developments in topics of social importance in the media, the coverage of news of social importance in most cases terminates upon publication of an

event related to the problem in question. There are very few specific cases that serve as a platform for following up on a problem, project, or phenomenon.

Very often we come across coverage of studies, conference, or different statements, some of which have a significant social importance and consequently a high public interest. It is very often that in the coming days there is a follow-up on these topics, or that the problem exposed is further investigated upon initiative of the newspaper.

With their professional evolution and the experience gained, the media through the years have done an increasingly good job in reporting simple news, often racing with each other on who gets there first. What seems to be a step that Albanian media have yet to make or improve is the in-depth report of news in general, a step that would enable the discovery and presentation of the essence of the problem. In a media that is supposed to serve public interest, the publication of a report stating that half of Albanian children live in full poverty, should serve as a news story to explore in the following days, with different sources, and not terminate the day that one newspaper page was filled with the report publication.

However, this is the fate of most news of social importance in daily newspaper: if there are no new events, no new statement, or a follow-up event, then the problem terminates there. Newspapers' own initiatives to investigate or follow a problem continuously, even though the problem might be important, seem to be a luxury that Albanian papers cannot afford for the moment.

Beyond the priorities established within the newsroom or the professional level of journalists, another explanation for this situation should be found also in the reduced number of newspaper staff, as well as in the frequent change of jobs of journalists, which do not allow for a satisfactory professionalisation and specialization of journalists. However, even though it is clear that Albanian media face problems that influence its quality in reporting, informing on social issues is a priority for the whole society and media cannot be fully realized unless it adapts to this demand.

## **5. Recommendations on improvement of reporting on social issues**

It is clear that the quality of reporting in Albanian media has improved significantly as it becomes more experienced. However, areas such as reporting of social issues, which present a high public interest, need continuous improvement. The recommendations offered here aim to offer some alternatives or steps that the media and other actors can take in order to improve the situation. However, this list is by no means exhaustive and can be further enriched or detailed by the media themselves. Even though it is clear that Albanian media has to solve other issues that influence its quality of reporting, such as labor relations, media market, editorial independence, etc., a greater orientation towards public interest is definitely a priority in the media landscape.

Even though there have been significant attempts to define the essence of journalism, in spite of the continuous evolution of this profession, the essence remains the same. In an

attempt to codify public expectations of journalism the Committee of Concerned Journalists embarked on a three-year consultation involving public debate and discussions with journalists<sup>85</sup>:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

These basic principles fully express the essence of what journalism is supposed to be. For this reason, these basic, but fundamental principles in this profession, could not be left out of this policy paper as a useful reminder in improving reporting on social issues.

Apart from basic principles, which are valid for any kind of reporting, having in mind also the main findings of the monitoring reports on social issues in daily newspapers, the following suggestions can be considered from the media, but also from other relevant actors:

5.a. When possible, the media should go beyond the news of the day and engage in more in-depth reporting or overviews that focus on a phenomenon. This is the only way to fill the void that exists between news or event coverage and the creation of a more complete overview for the public on issues of public importance. Furthermore, this is an opportunity for print media to develop and explore its analytical feature, especially in the context of the competition it faces with the television, which seems to have a clear advantage in news reporting.

5.b Newsrooms should establish well-defined sectors, where the main rule is the profilisation of journalists. In this way, there are more chances to have a more informed, more complete and more in-depth reporting of each one of the topics that are socially significant.

5.c Depending of the profilisation of the journalists, NGOs, the newsrooms, or other bodies, should enable continuous training sessions on the topic covered by the journalists. This is the only way to improve the understanding of the topic by the journalists and consequently the quality of reporting.

5.d As broad as possible representation of actors and voices involved in an event, news, or phenomenon, should be a priority. In this way, the sources of information would be more diverse in the reporting of social issues and the public debate in the media would be more complete, more honest, and more representative.

---

<sup>85</sup> Bill Kovach & Tom Rosenstiel, "The elements of journalism."



5.e Particular attention should be paid to the details and information conveyed, in order to avoid the banalisation of the phenomenon, as well as undue damage to the persons mentioned in the article. A more mature or skeptical approach to an event, person, or words used would improve the ethical performance, but also the professional level of coverage of social issues.

5.f Information offices should be established and function efficiently in all official institutions. A better implementation of the law on access to information of official documents would facilitate the work of journalists, would improve the public debate and would increase the transparency of government institutions.

5.g Non-government organizations and other important actors should have a good and regular cooperation and communication with the media, so that the alternative angles and viewpoints become part of the public debate. Establishment of regular contacts and briefings with journalists on specific problems and issues from this sector would contribute in a more complete information for the media and consequently for the public.

5.h Frequent professional meetings, conferences or forums within the newsroom, in the media community, or with the cooperation of other actors or the public, in order to discuss ways of improving reporting on social issues, would be useful for this purpose, but also for self-examination of the media.

5.i Establishment of the open forums for the public, where suggestions and remarks can be offered on the coverage of social issues, would also be a test or guideline that the media can use in improving its reporting on these issues.

5.j Establishment of a practice where journalists of a particular beat are informed regularly on the progress and steps taken on a specific reform by the responsible authorities, as this is the only way to avoid misunderstandings, sensational or biased reporting, and the public can be informed accurately and regularly on issues of public significance.