

REPORTING ON CHILDREN IN PRINT MEDIA:

MONITORING OF SIX DAILY NEWSPAPERS

(JULY-DECEMBER 2007)

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Introduction

In order to have a better understanding of the way media covers and represents children, a monitoring report of the main six daily newspapers was carried out in a six-month period, from July-December 2007. The daily newspapers were from mainstream media and the ones considered to have the largest number of sales. Since there are no official data on the sales of newspapers and their overall circulation, the selection of newspapers to monitor was made on the basis of private consulting with the editors-in-chief of the daily publications. The daily publications included in the monitoring report were: *Shekulli*, *Panorama*, *Standard*, *Gazeta Shqiptare*, *Albania*, and *Shqip*. During this time all the articles featuring, involving or affecting children were monitored. Children in this case were defined as those under 18 years of age. In order to have as a complete picture as possible, articles that did not focus especially on children but were related to them were also considered.

The analysis of the monitored articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The main topics that came up in these articles and hence were included in the analysis were children trafficking, juvenile crime and justice, violence, education, health problems, issues related to teenager problems, etc. The total number of articles monitored was 770 articles for all six newspapers. Articles monitored did not include only news stories, but also editorials, features, brief news, etc. The articles' length varied from two paragraphs to two tabloid pages, depending on the news.

Newspaper	Number of items on children (July-December 2007)
Shekulli	126
Shqip	157
Panorama	129
Albania	110
Standard	80
Gazeta Shqiptare	168
Total	770

Although in general the articles on children were not central to the space of newspapers monitored, the trend was different in some specific months. This was due to some grave events and crimes that involved minors in that period. In addition, the monitoring period covered the months of September and October, which mark the start of academic year and hence focused more on the problems with schools, children, textbooks, and other related issues.

Topics	Number of items per topic
Crime reporting	227
Education	280

Health	85
Other	178
Total	770

In general, the newspapers continue to be mostly coherent with regard to the range of topics on children covered. However, as it will be shown later, there are distinctions among the newspapers regarding the manner of coverage on these issues. Apart from the range of topics covered and the information conveyed, the analysis focuses on the ethical conduct of newspapers vis-à-vis children, public interest versus privacy protection, use of sources in covering children, sensationalism versus civic journalism, etc. The following sections identify the prevailing problems, issues, and cases that involve children coverage in the newspapers. By illustrating with the reports on special major events/cases involving minors, the following analysis will attempt to shed light on the main range of problems and improvements of Albanian media with regard to coverage of children.

Identification of minors

One of the most sensitive aspects of combing through media coverage is finding the articles that deal with children, the way they are identified, presented, and dealt with, especially in times of distress and cases dealing with juvenile crime or juvenile victims of crime. Naturally, these are delicate cases even when reporting on adults; however, from the ethical point of view they assume a special importance when talking about children, given the different care and method that takes addressing minors. Compared to several years ago, when identification and coverage of minors was a major problem in Albanian media, there has been significant improvement in this area. However, as the following analysis and examples will show, this is still a lingering issue and it is far from totally solved in the Albanian media. Hence, having a careful look at the way minors are covered in the media can be revealing of the progress made in ethics in this area.

More specifically, the basic feature to start with in this analysis is the identification of minors in the media. Simple as it might look, in practice this basic feature is dealt with in different ways and unfortunately, many of these are far from obeying the child's highest interest. For example, it is very rarely that the minors are not identified in the articles. The most widespread practice is that of identifying them with initials, and no photos, which would seem reasonable. However, when looking closer at this practice, it does not seem that appropriate: most of the cases mentioned are in small villages or towns, where people know each other well and it is not difficult to understand who is the victim or the perpetrator if you have the initials and the age.

Quite frequently crimes involving minors happen in small communities, where people know each other well. In these cases providing initials renders the minor that is a victim or a suspect easily identifiable. Even more so when there are cases that not only are initials used, but also age, and sometimes names of parents. For example in the article "The high school student wounds his classmate after quarrel," it is said that A.Gjapi, 15, was wounded with a knife by I.Sula, his classmate, in Peshkopia's high school.

Another case is that of the articles on a missing boy in the woods of Vlora, who was found by a shepherd and could not be identified. After his relatives found him, the boy was identified; so were his parents, along with the information that the parents are mentally ill, that is the reason why they did not take proper care of the child.¹ While it is clear and commendable the newspaper's role in finding the boy's relatives, it is unclear what the public interest is in identifying mentally ill people after no harm is done, thus exposing the problems of this family to the whole public.

Another case that is even graver is that of an alleged incest in a village of Mallakastra, where it was suspected that the mother had urged her daughter to denounce the father to the police. The daughter is identified as S.Hoxha, 13, and her father was Azem Hoxha. It was also mentioned that the daughter is a student in sixth grade at the school of her village, Lapulec.² Hence, with these data, the girl is easily identifiable in the community where she lives, adding to her already delicate and difficult situation other problems to face, namely mockery and isolation from the community.

Another disputable case of media coverage involved the problem of the rehabilitation center for physically challenged children and adults in Korca, where the personnel was accused of maltreatment and abuse of some of the users of the center, including minors. While it was important to cover this issue in the media, it is unclear what was the public interest in publishing several photos of the children and persons that used this center. These photos reveal to the public persons that have physical problems, that live a separate life, and persons that may have been potentially abused. At the same time, the use of photos does not add any real value to the problem that is the center of the articles: that of abuse. In this case, it can only add to the difficulties that the users of the center may be already suffering, by identifying them to the whole public.

Intrusion into private life

The way people are addressed by the media in cases of grief, mourning, accidents, or general distress and how this is reported to the public, are very revealing of the ethical level of the media and journalists. Even more so when intrusion is made vis-à-vis minors or is about minors. In general, Albanian journalists seem to have no problems getting interviews from victims, witnesses, or relatives of the victims or perpetrators, sometimes even the perpetrators themselves. This is an aspect that adds to the complexity of covering social issues or crime and court reporting; however, this is not necessarily done in a manner that is ethical to the interviewees and the information is not necessarily vital to the public.

For example, one of the many shocking cases involving children in these months has been the rape of a 10-year-old girl in Lezha by her uncle. All the articles, apart from reporting on this event, also give specific details on how it happened. For example: "His eyes blind with the animal instinct, the uncle silenced her mouth with a pillow, beat her up, and then raped her. The girl, with blood all over her body, returned home screaming." Other details follow: "shocked by the pain and the blood that dripped down

¹ "Lost 12-year-old returns home," Albania, 29.09.2007, f.18.

² "Mother urges daughter to denounce incest," Shqip, 05.09.2007, p.21.

her legs, the girl barely made it to her house. Those few meters in the street still bear the signs of crime.”³

These details clearly indicate that in this extreme case the reporters have been talking to the family or possibly the victim itself, interviewing them in such a desperate moment. In addition, there is a pixellated photo of the girl in her hospital bed. Although she cannot be recognized in this case, her uncle is fully identified, with photo and full name. Hence, the coverage of the article deals with two specific questions in this case. First, the question of how appropriate and necessary is to disturb the family and especially the victim in this case. The second question relates to a more long-term effect, namely the impact of publishing these graphic details on the girl’s tragedy in her later life and how this will affect her and her family.

Another similar case is that of the 15-year-old that was raped by her father and even had a child with him. All the newspapers covered this story, identifying the father with photo and name. While most newspapers identified the girl with her initial and age, only one of the newspapers interviewed the girl. The paper also published a photo of her interview, where the eyes were blurred. The interview asks her questions on how events rolled, on the birth, and on the future of her baby. This case represents a classic dilemma between intrusion into private life and the interest of the victim to become public. While the interview and the photo make public the girl’s pain and trauma, the interview also leaves space to the girl to expose her appeal to the state for financial aid in this case⁴. So, while it is questionable whether all those private questions are driven by sensationalism, it can also be said that the paper provides a voice for the girl and her problems and needs at the moment.

Another case represents a minor dilemma and in fact can be considered almost insignificant to the previous ones: the explosion of gas in a café and the wounding of a minor. The wounded minor is interviewed in the hospital and her photo in the hospital bed is also published. The reporter interviews her on how the incident happened and these kinds of questions. Although this is not as flagrant a case as the previous ones, the need to disturb, interview, and photograph a 12-year-old in her bed in such a banal incident is still debatable.

Again, the delicate balance between public interest and privacy protection seems to always tip in favour of the public interest. However, not all newspapers seem to have the same definition and concept for the public interest. Arguably, the most difficult decisions are made in the most extreme cases. In this context, the kidnapping and murdering of a 10-year-old is arguably the most severe and painful case involving minors in these months. Hence, analyzing the coverage of this issue can provide a real test of media ethics.

Coverage of the murder of 10-year-old

³ “Uncle rapes 10-year-old niece,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 13.10.2007, p.25.

⁴ “I don’t want the baby I had with my father,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 2.12.2007, p.18.

The case of kidnapping and then murder of 10-year-old in Peshkopia has been widely followed by all newspapers that were monitored. In general, the newspapers were quite coherent in the manner of coverage of this shocking event, in terms of information conveyed, the persons interviewed, photos used, details given, etc. Before the police found the body of the child, the newspapers all had interviews with at least one of the parents, with his uncle, the teacher or headmaster, friends, etc. The interviews and photos continued even after the death of the child was discovered, disrupting the grief of the family in this manner, although the severity of the case perhaps called for a closer coverage than usual.

More importantly in terms of media coverage, this case brought along articles other than reports from the city on this event. Most of the newspapers published editorials for the case, interviews with psychologists, provided data and comparisons with similar cases in the past, etc. It must be said that these kinds of articles, analysis, or more in-depth information on minors usually lacks in Albanian media. The coverage of similar cases or of minors in general is limited only to reporting the event, some in a more sensational manner than others, and then jumping on to the next event. The shock of this event led to a joint reaction of media in adding other elements to the usual coverage of minors as victims.

For example, in October 31, while reporting on the news of the day on the murder, "Shqip" newspaper also publishes a sidebar about missing children, titled "The figures, every three days, two missing children,"⁵ as well as another article about the status of two other missing children.⁶ The first sidebar tends to use a language that somehow diminishes the importance of the problem of missing children. For example, it says: "Blue uniforms of the capital face this phenomenon everyday and it seems that this is en vogue." The referral to this grave problem in this manner tends to belittle the significance and even allude that the causes are related to whims of the moment or fashion trends, rather than to deep-seated social problems. However, this term aside, the newspaper certainly has tried to shift public opinion's attention to this matter.

Another newspaper that has addressed the gravity of the problem in terms of social relevance is "Shekulli," which has published an article titled: "The alarm: about 6,000 schizophrenics live among us."⁷ The article is based on an interview with the head of psychiatric department in Tirana's hospital, who explains the legal reasons why the mentally ill persons cannot always be isolated. The article also contains figures on this issue, both informing and in a way alerting the reader to the risks posed by these persons to the community.

Similarly, Shqip newspaper summarizes a TV talk show of the evening earlier, where many legal experts, psychologists, social workers, etc, discussed the problem. Among others, the article also discusses the impact of violence in the media in children's education and protection: "Politics, movies, fights in the street, reinforce the aggressive

⁵ "Figures, every three days, two children are declared missing," Shqip, 31.10.2007, p.6.

⁶ "Two missing children are found in Tirana and in Pogradec," Shqip, 31.10.2007, p.6.

⁷ Shekulli, 20.10.2007, p.6.

models and children fall prey to this violence. They are victims of physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual violence.”⁸ Similarly, the debate is also carried on by daily Panorama, which has an interview with a psychiatrist on the impact of mentally ill persons on the community, and especially on children.

Unlike other cases, where newspapers only report on the cases and events involving minors, this time they also took a stance against violence on minors and called for an immediate need for everyone to get involved and improve the situation.

Editorials on/for children

As mentioned above, the editorials on children’s issues are almost inexistent in daily newspapers. This trend indicates the low importance of reporting on minors and betrays a sense of undervaluing the implications of the minors’ development for the future of the society. Most of the time the minors are viewed as attractive to report on only when they represent victims or perpetrators, leading to sensational or paternalistic coverage of the event and the persons, and not the phenomenon itself.

However, this period the media seems to be more aware of the need to change this situation. Also due to a series of grave cases involving children, a series of articles/editorials/in-depth articles on children were published. Perhaps the most exemplary one was that of Fatos Baxhaku in Shqip: “Our sins.”⁹ Reacting after the brutal murder of the 10-year-old and other events, the author’s editorial puts on the spotlight the difficult life of children in present Albania, in various aspects and due to different reasons, pointing out at the need for everyone, media included, to improve this situation. In his words:

“Why do we have in only one month three cases of grave misfortunes, involving children of the same age? Why all these cases are located in the North? Are our tears sufficient, true as they are, but delayed nonetheless? Why are we reminded of children only when they die or only on June 1, the day when we all become kinder and spread chocolates all over?”

The author shares the responsibilities among all actors involved: politics, school, media, NGOs, and every person, taking a strong stance on the need to get involved and change this extremely grave situation. “We aspire to integrate in Europe, along with the army of analphabetic children, exploited children, little salesmen of cigarettes, with those children that get used to violence even before they start to speak... They live next to us, close to us, and we know it, we just pretend we don’t notice...”¹⁰

Similarly, the same newspaper has another editorial on the very day the news of the murder of the 10-year-old was published. The author tries to find the guilty persons of this unimaginable crime as he calls it, ending up sharing the blame with everyone. “We

⁸ “A crime that could have been avoided,” Shqip, 2.11.2007, p.24.

⁹ 30.10.2007, p.9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

all must feel guilty, because we have been indifferent while the system of mental institutions was being destroyed and the mentally ill, due to their illness, were butchering the others, inside their families and beyond.”¹¹

However, this shocking event was not the only cause for editorials. It must be said that other phenomena and grave problems that children face in Albania nowadays became inspiration for the columnists to take a stance for the future of the children. Exploitation of children was such a topic, addressed in an editorial by Ledia Lazri in Shqip. Inspired by a group of street entertainers, who had two little children, clearly not happy to be in this group, she writes against the phenomenon of exploitation of children, and especially against the indifference that we all contribute to in this aspect. “I went on my way along the noisy streets of Tirana and I felt anger growing inside me;... I left, respecting in this way social ethics, and assisting in a horrible crime: the destruction of the present and future of these children.”¹²

Another editorial that deserves mentioning in this case is that of the isolated children in the Northern area of the country because of blood feud. The author, describing the plight of these children, who only children can no longer be called, appeals to the reader for the need to do something for this extreme situation, and do it immediately. “The isolated children do not want to know about the analysis of this phenomenon; unfortunately, they live shut away, isolated from the air and the sun, deprived of the right to be free and to play, to learn, to receive medical assistance; they are violated in every right that Albania knows to children and every right that this country has signed in the children’s conventions, because they are children after all....”¹³ Even though these articles tend to lean on the sentimentalist side time after time, it is important to have these articles. In the end, they are among the most efficient methods used to raise awareness among policymakers, public opinion, civil society, international community, and other relevant actors on these very pressing issues disturbing Albanian children and society.

The last example to be mentioned in this regard is that on the educating role of school in children and the decrepit state of this role at the moment. Led by an episode when a student shot a specific body part of the teacher with his cell phone during class, the author ponders the need to establish some basic discipline and carefully review the state of the education system in the country. He also points out the trend of change of idols for today’s minors, warning of the change of values and future of society and of media’s role in this. “The idols and symbols of this generation are no longer persons that have contributed to society, great writers, distinct persons in art and sports, or great personalities. Nowadays, the only idols are some women that sing in third-level televisions Greek songs in Albanian language and are proud to admit that every week they end up drunk at the police station, the ones that the media labels as VIP.”¹⁴

Hence, as it can be noticed, the editorials/features/opinions focus on several issues and are written in various forms. The thing they have in common is the alarm on minors’

¹¹ Kamber Velaj, “A death that weighs on us all,” 28.10.2007, p.7.

¹² Ledia Lazri, “Violators of Albanian children,” Shqip, 16.09.2007, p.35.

¹³ Arta Sakja, “Isolated children- victims of indifference,” Gazeta Shqiptare, 07.11.2007, p.23.

¹⁴ Mentor Kikia, “Teacher in thongs and the debasement of school,” 27.11.2007, p.9.

situation, be it their protection, education, impact of adults, state, media on them, and the attempt to raise awareness among the public.

Diversity of topics and different aspects of children's coverage

In fact, the strength of the above-mentioned editorials lies not only in the fact that they mobilize for children, but also on the range of issues that they try to take a stance on. The diversity of topics, (although it can never be sufficient given the situation,) is a welcome news of this monitoring. Although crime reporting involving minors still is the most attractive news, it is fair to mention that significant attempts have been made to address other equally important and serious aspects, such as education and its infrastructure, quality, and opportunity, sicknesses of children (from the most common flu to HIV, thalassemia, mental health), blood feud-isolated children, exploited children, abused children, working children, orphan and poor children, juvenile justice problems, health system problems, etc. In addition to these problems, which, obviously, some newspapers cover better than others, there are also some success stories on minors, significantly fewer, but present nonetheless. Having a closer look at all these matters is revealing of the media coverage of minors.

Diversity of topics covered

These six months have marked a wider coverage in terms of topics that are relevant to and affect children, especially compared to the monitoring completed in October 2006 in daily newspapers. Perhaps the longer period of time or the eventfulness of these months have had their share in this outcome. However, the truth is that education, health, juvenile justice and crime, street children, and other numerous problems that children face appeared in all daily newspapers, in some more than in others.

One of the most covered topics has been that of education system, the problems with its infrastructure, and other topics. The main reason for the high density of the articles on this topic has been the start of the academic year in September and the continuing problems in October.

The bulk of the articles on this topic is related to the lack of appropriate conditions and atmosphere in the schools and kindergartens, as well as to other problems related to the school or not. Most of the newspapers carried not just brief descriptive articles on the first day of school, but also two-page features on the start of the new academic year, especially focusing on newcomers and on old and new problems.

While most of the problems addressed (bad school infrastructure, expensive academic tools, lack of textbooks, etc) were quite familiar to the reader, there was a new topic that newspapers had focused on rarely, that of the isolated children because of blood feud, who could not go to school like kids of their age. So, an article published in Panorama on October 5 addresses this problem, giving official figures on this problem that nobody seems to have a solution for. The article states that there are 67 kids that are isolated and

there is a total of 350 students in Shkodra district that cannot follow the education process like their friends, because they have to be isolated within their homes.¹⁵

Another article¹⁶, published in Shqip, in addition to figures also brings to the reader a concrete example and the human face of a six-year-old girl, suffering this problem. The article publishes a close-up shot of the little girl. The lead also starts by describing how the girl stayed one hour on the window, looking at kids of her same age going to school for the first time, while she could not. The photo, interview with the girl, and descriptions, bring the problem and pain of these children closer to the reader, making the whole topic easier to grasp. Moreover, the article has a sidebar with detailed figures of the official data and studies on this problem, which lends even more credibility to the whole article and makes the presentation of the problem more complete.

A more comprehensive feature article on first-grade pupils that did not make it to school is the one published in Standard on the first day of school. The article focuses not only on children that do not start their education because of blood feud isolation, but also because of other problems. Significant space is devoted to the children that do not go to school because they have to work at such a tender age, bringing a specific example, an interview with an unfortunate child that worked to support his family and could not afford to go to school. "Although he longed to go back to school, life did not take account of the wishes of this kid, and forced him grow up before his time, burdening him with responsibilities too heavy for his age."¹⁷ In this way, although the reporting tends to get sympathetic notes to the children and risk to border on sentimentalism in some cases, it still succeeds in bringing human faces and children's voices to the reader, with their problems and their joys, rendering the picture more complete and more real.

In addition, attention was also paid to the children of the ethnic minorities in the south of the country. So, Shqip carried an article titled "Greek minority schools, learning with textbooks in Albanian,"¹⁸ informing on the lack of textbooks in their own language. The same problem was covered the next day in Panorama, along with an article on problems that the Macedonian minority high school students were facing in another area.¹⁹ In this way, it looks like there are greater attempts from the newspapers to cover more issues regarding education, and also cover more territory and population, both in geographic, and in social terms.

This is also evident in other articles regarding especially the infrastructure problems of the education system. For example, other articles (mainly in the form of brief news) published on the first day of school were: "Diber, 50,000 pupils start their school with no textbooks,"²⁰ "Saranda, the first day verifies the absences in textbooks,"²¹ "Elbasan, first-

¹⁵ "Shkoder, blood feud keeps 67 kids within their houses," 05.10.2007, p.14.

¹⁶ "Shkoder, blood feud keeps 122 children out of school," 18.09.2007, p.6.

¹⁷ "The first bell, not for everyone," Standard, 18.09.2007, p10-11.

¹⁸ Shqip, 18.09.2007, p.6.

¹⁹ "Macedonian minority high school boycotts lesson," Panorama, 19.09.2007, p.22.

²⁰ Shqip, 18.09.2007, p.6.

²¹ Ibid.

grade teachers have five 'ABC' texts to choose from,"²² "The new school does not even have bathrooms, pupils boycott the learning,"²³ "Fier, most schools still under construction,"²⁴ etc. These brief, but informing articles, try to build a mosaic of pictures from different areas and problems.

Most importantly, the problem of education continues to be covered in other months, not just in the start of the academic year. An article that can be mentioned in this regard is the investigation of the problem of extracurricular courses, taught by the teachers for a fee. The article addresses the problem and ethics of teachers pressuring students and threatening them to lower their grades if they do not attend these courses.²⁵ The article's completeness and credibility is also enhanced by the inclusion of interviews with students and by the opinion of a social scientist in this regard.

Other articles, covering students other than the ones in capital, can be mentioned, such as those following the problems of the boarding school students in two cities of the country,²⁶ the lack of schools for distant villages in different cities (e.g. "Pupils, tens of km away from knowledge" in Shqip, 24.11.2007, p.22) drugs in schools (e.g. "Durrës, one in ten students is a drug user," in Shqip, 11.11.2007, p.16,) etc.

Civic journalism

In this context, while describing the problems of children, some of the articles are written in a way that reveals the journalist's involvement in the cause of improving children's status. In some articles this trend is clearer than in others. An article on the state of a decrepit kindergarten building in Burrel describes the numerous problems they face, especially with hygiene.²⁷ Through an interview with the director, the reporter describes the horrible state of the kindergarten, making an indirect appeal for the immediate improvement of the situation.

Similarly, lack of heating conditions in schools and kindergartens have inspired several reporters to write on this problem (e.g. "Pupils shiver with cold in their classrooms," in Gazeta Shqiptare, 07.12.2007, p.21, or "Tirana, children in kindergartens and schools like in fridges," Shqip, 23.10.2007, p.21.) Quite often these articles include descriptions of the status and how it affects the little children, e.g.: "They stay from 8 a.m. until late afternoon in cold rooms. The only heat they have is the air they breathe. Even though they are there to learn or play, they are stuffed with their coats, scarves, and hats."²⁸ In other cases, interviews with children are also included: "Often our hands are so numb that we cannot write. We do not jot down even a line, and the whole class passes and our

²² Ibid.

²³ Shqip, 19.09.2007, p.22.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Teachers 'reap' the students with private courses," Shekulli, 03.10.2007, p.6.

²⁶ "Hungry boarding students boycott lessons," and "Hygiene closes the boarding school, 120 students are left on the street," in Gazeta Shqiptare, 17.10.2007, p.23.

²⁷ "Kindergarten in Burrel, where the children play with mice," Panorama, 17.11.2007, p.10.

²⁸ "Tirana, kids in kindergartens and schools like in fridges," Shqip, 23.10.2007, p.21.

hands are in the pockets.”²⁹ Both descriptions and selected quotes lead to a more complete picture and bring the situation closer to the public.

However, in addition to education problems, the reporters also tend to assist children with other problems through their articles. An example is that of three orphans, whose mother died when their house burnt down. The article appeals for assistance for these kids in the title and beyond: “Find a shelter for the three orphans.”³⁰ It goes on to describe the situation of the three unfortunate kids: “They feel horrified by the horrid death of their mother... Their gaze roams innocently all over, unable to grasp the greatest misfortune of their life.” These sentences and similar phrases used in these cases depict tragic situations and reveal the pity of the person that writes these lines. Although the use of these phrases is questionable in terms of conveying news to the public, the good intention is certainly to be underlined when discussing this matter.

Another similar case is that of an article³¹ writing on eight orphans that live in an extremely rundown building in Vlora, through the threats of the owner to leave and the hope that the municipality will solve their problem. Grave descriptions of mice living in the building, or the putrid smell of the sewages, the inability to buy medicine for their sicknesses, etc, are all graphically conveyed in the article. This article is a clear example of reporters using media power to assist in some way needy persons, by raising awareness on their problems. However, the balance between preserving dignity of the persons and assisting them is always a difficult one to strike.

It seems that orphans and abandoned children are very sensitive issues for the reporters and newspapers, as they are among the most covered topics. However, there rarely is a concerted effort to cover these topics as a phenomenon, with all the data and opinion they can gather and individual cases to depict the phenomenon, as well as search for possible solutions. Rather, as is the case with many other issues, only sensitive cases are displayed, with no follow-up on the phenomenon, its causes, impact, and solution. For example, in the case of the inauguration of a center for persons with limited capabilities, the reporter makes public the story of an 11-year-old boy who is sick and was abandoned by his parents, and later his grandparents. Although the article deals with the plight of this category of children, it is debatable whether the story is justified in hurting the dignity of somebody who cannot fight for his dignity in these conditions and whose story appears in the title, proclaiming to the public: “The little guy who was abandoned by the parents.”³²

Children in figures

However, in spite of the presence of articles as the ones mentioned above, assuming that only specific cases is what journalists are after would be an oversimplification. There are a number of articles on different topics, which try to have a more comprehensive view

²⁹ “Pupils shiver with cold in their classes,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 07.12.2007, p.21.

³⁰ “Find a shelter for the three orphans,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 23.10.2007, p.23.

³¹ “Eight orphans, amidst poverty and misery,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 18.10.2007, p.15.

³² *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 04.12.2007, p.11.

and provide available statistics, survey, and other data of the overall picture. More importantly, these articles all carry information on extremely sensitive topics affecting children presently, such as exploitation of children, education, illiteracy, drugs and alcohol, etc.

For example, an article builds on a report by the Ministry of Labour, which states that “32% of kids aged 6-17 work,”³³ describing the alarming status of exploitation of children for labour. Another article³⁴ builds on the same topic, but a different study, stating that 21% of pupils drop out because of poverty. The article goes on describing the situation in this regard, based on an interview with an expert of the Ministry of Education, providing other more detailed figures and causes for this problem. Along the same lines, yet another article³⁵ stresses the fact that students in Albania have an average of stay at school 6 years less than their EU counterparts, providing figures and explanations for the situation.

Another topic that comes up in this regard is that of health of children, and especially of teenagers, which is a group particularly sensitive to use of drugs and alcohol. In this regard, the newspapers publish data and surveys on the current situation. So, an article³⁶ published in November points out that one in ten pupils uses drugs in schools, pointing at the alarming situation. Similarly, the publication of another study gets coverage in the newspapers, indicating that 12% of the surveyed persons are drug users and 20% of them drink alcohol above the norm, while 2% are addicted to alcohol.³⁷

Other topics related to health of children and teenagers also appear in the newspapers, although their frequency is not considerable. So, an article³⁸, based on an interview with a gynaecologist, indicates the need for raising awareness on STDs and the need of practicing safe sex. The article provides data that reveal that girls are having sex at increasingly younger ages, which renders them insufficiently aware and prepared for facing the consequences. The interviewer provides data on the emergence of STD cases among the teenagers, alerting the readers that greater awareness and other measures have to be taken on this important problem.

In addition, newspapers are also not indifferent to problems such as importance of healthy nutrition, although these articles are far from frequent and more should be done in this regard. So, a detailed article³⁹ provides data on nutrition habits of children, depicting an alarming situation on the need to raise awareness among parents and kids alike on changing these bad habits and improving food. It should also be mentioned that daily Shekulli also lends one page every week to a paediatrician, who briefs the parents on different problems related to health of children, pertaining to both their physical and mental development.

³³ “The report, 32% of kids aged 6-17 work,” Shekulli, 17.11.2007, p.11.

³⁴ “Illiteracy, 5,000 children on the street,” Shqip, 13.11.2007, p.22.

³⁵ “Our children, 6 years less of education than EU average,” Shekulli, 09.09.2007, p.20.

³⁶ “Durrës, one in ten pupils has used drugs,” Shqip, 11.11.2007, p.16.

³⁷ “Tirana ‘champion’, 20% of high school students are alcoholic,” Gazeta Shqiptare, 11.10.2007, p.13.

³⁸ “Vlore, the age of the first sexual relation gets lower,” Shekulli, 13.11.2007, p.13.

³⁹ “Children, 10% eat only two meals per day,” Panorama, 10.11.2007, p.7.

Finally, another article to be mentioned in this regard is that on the case of a 12-year-old in Shkodra, run over by a car while running for the ball⁴⁰. More importantly, the article deals with the phenomenon and mentions other cases, including an opinion from the police that the subject should be introduced in schools and kids should be educated with the rules of the streets, in order to avoid these tragedies.

Overall, these attempts to address such important topics as child nutrition and health, although are still few and limited, are good signs that there is greater awareness among reporters and experts alike on the need to change the situation and on media's role in achieving progress in this direction.

Sources of/on children

As it can be expected, children are rarely the center of the articles monitored. Instead, the grown-ups are always talking in their names, be it their parents, government representatives, human rights activists, experts, etc. In fact, the lives of ordinary children are rarely depicted, investigated, or featured in the pages of these newspapers. One reason for this might be the nature of these publications, which rarely include feature stories, but just breaking news in most of the time.

However, there are certainly exceptions to this trend, and it seems that children's voices are finally appearing to do the talking for themselves. An eminent example is the in-depth reportage⁴¹ published on Bulqiza, on the children that dig the mountain to sell the chrome they find there. A few days earlier a child was almost buried under the mountain while doing this, and the reporter goes there to meet these kids that risk their life every day and are anything but children with an ordinary life. In so doing, it is the children themselves that become protagonists of the article and speak in their own words about their own life and problems, bringing a fresh, although painful, note in these articles.

There are also extremely few articles that focus on portraits of children, because of something extraordinary that has happened to them, someone they have lost, some talent they have, and similar reasons. Such an example is the article "Dea, the daughter of a martyr,"⁴² focusing on the portrait of a 10-year-old girl, whose father was killed in the fighting in Macedonia in 2004. With clear, sympathetic notes on this girl, who was separated by her father too soon, the article conveys the emotions of this girl in this regard, describing also her current life and how she copes without her father. Although the article assumes definitively sentimentalism as its main topic, it is nonetheless an attempt to bring to the reader a portrait of a child, and there are only a few pages in hundreds of newspaper pages that take the time and space to do it.

However, as mentioned, it is a real challenge to find any articles where children are quoted and the above article is one of the few exceptions. What one can certainly find

⁴⁰ "Shkoder, 12-year-old is run over to death," Shekulli, 28.11.2007, p.11.

⁴¹ "The children of the silent mountain", Shqip, 04.11.2007, p.36.

⁴² "Dea, the daughter of a martyr," Shqip, 22.11.2007, p.23.

very easily is the presence or statements of government officials or human rights activists that talk on children and for children; whether it's on their behalf or not, that is debatable. More specifically, such events as the release of a report on children, the celebration of an anniversary of a village of children in need, or any other similar event always make it to the news, featuring the respective statements of the involved politicians, ranging from the President, to the Speaker of Parliament, the Minister of Education, Minister of Justice, the Mayor of Tirana, etc.

Such events were quite visible with the start of the academic year or even some days later, as politicians and other figures also gained visibility in these days, besides children. For example, if we look at two newspapers in September 14, both Standard⁴³ and Gazeta Shqiptare⁴⁴ had articles on municipality's action of distributing school tools to poor children. While this is certainly a commendable action, both articles have published a full, long paragraph of the speech that the Mayor of Tirana gave for the occasion, along with all the names of the organizations that contributed to the effort. However, not even a word is mentioned about or comes from the children themselves, who are the ones that benefit directly from this action.

Similarly, another article describes the participation of Mayor Edi Rama in the inauguration of a renovated kindergarten⁴⁵. The article takes several paragraphs to give the statistics of the funds of assistance that the municipality has used to renovate these kindergartens, the detailed improvements that have been made, the Mayor's words on the occasion. Again, in spite of the immense improvement of all these children's lives by the project of renovation of kindergartens, not even a child speaks for this issue.

The same practice is true in other cases, in other articles. Another one that can be mentioned in this aspect is the brief article on one member of parliament that had decided to financially support 35 orphans in his constituency and offer a scholarship to the student with best results. The article⁴⁶ gives details about the initiative, the supporting foundation, the reasons of the MP to take such action in his own words, but, as it seldom happens, the children, whose life could change because of this initiative, are totally absent.

An even more flagrant case of this trend is the article about the company that runs the mine of Bulqiza, where a series of accidents led to the death of several miners. The article⁴⁷ reveals the company's decision to grant a pension to the children of the dead miners until they are able to work. This decision and the reasons for taking this decision are briefly explained in a short paragraph. The rest of the article goes on informing about the change of shareholders inside the company, its concession history, the extent of its establishment in Albania and its hopes for the future. In short, the article has the typical

⁴³ "Municipality Tirana gives school tools for 200 pupils of 'Vasil Shanto'", 14.09.2007, p.11.

⁴⁴ "Municipality distributes school kits for poor children," 14.09.2007, p.13.

⁴⁵ "Inauguration of kindergarten, Rama: Let's approach the European standards," Shekulli, 13.11.2007, p.11.

⁴⁶ "Neraxhi, assistance to the children of Krraba," Panorama, 13.09.2007, p.4.

⁴⁷ "'Darfo', retirement pension to 14 children of Bulqiza victims," Standard, 18.09.2007, p.6.

form of a press release, where the company is the only protagonist. Needless to say, children are not seen or heard anywhere, the company's history, generosity, and future investments have taken their place, although the story is supposed to be about children.

While the presence of politicians, businessmen, human rights activists, etc., in these articles cannot be judged and it is certainly a good sign that high-rank officials and other stakeholders are involved in these important causes, their visibility is certainly disproportionate compared to that of the children themselves, who are supposed to constitute the focus of the reports. None of the articles published in this regard featured any children and their feedback or experience on the whole range of problems.

Children and HIV/AIDS

On a more positive side, the daily newspapers have a quite correct, mature, and sometimes supportive attitude towards children infected with HIV/AIDS, at least in the articles monitored in this period. The most visible case is that of two twins infected with the virus, who went to first grade this year. Even though the secrecy of their identity should be preserved, the information leaked in this case. The parents of other children insisted that they left the school, as they were afraid for the health of their own children. The school headmaster and the Ministry of Education were firm in their decision to support the twins and guarantee the others that there were no risks in this matter.

In general the media coverage of these events, sometimes in the shape of a real protest from the parents, was quite interested, extensive, and mature. The articles brought both the concern of the other parents and the suffering of the mother of the two twins and her efforts to raise awareness among the public. In addition, almost every article was accompanied by sidebars with opinions from doctors, psychologists, health inspectors, etc. In addition, Gazeta Shqiptare also put a note saying that the real name of the school and of course, those of the children, were not published in order to protect their privacy, while the mother was identified with initials.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the other newspapers published the name of the school, but any other information on the identity of the children was out of the question. This newspaper was also clearly sided with the light of the family infected with the virus, expressing its own opinion in a sidebar by the informative piece: "Where is it written that if you have AIDS you have to be excluded from the society, who said this... This is our society, uninformed, scared, ignorant, insensitive, fully immersed in immorality and at the same time, wrongly, demands to strip the two twins infected with AIDS from their right to live."

The stance of society vis-à-vis persons infected with AIDS and the isolation and stigma they face is also present in another article, in Shqip daily. The article is about a family in Mallakaster, where both parents died because of the virus three years ago; the story tells how their children live and the isolation they face. The grave situation hits you even in the title: "Mallakaster, in the house isolated because of the AIDS stigma," while the subtitle is: "The children do not have friends. The grown-ups do not expect any visits."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "The protest: the two children infected with AIDS should go," Gazeta Shqiptare, 05.10.2007.

⁴⁹ Shqip, 02.12.2007, p.14.

The suffering of the children amidst all this isolation is also conveyed: “The daughter is a high school student in Fratar, but she cannot think of a family, because society stays away from her. She stays alone in her bank and waits for someone to talk to her. Roland, her brother, suffers the same persecution.” While this article is an exception in this case and not the rule, it certainly constitutes significant attempt to describe the phenomenon by using an example of misfortune of a family.

Conclusion

In general, it can be said that children’s problems have slowly made it to the pages of Albanian dailies, in some more than in others. However, the media coverage of children is still far from regular, systematic, in-depth, and ethical one. The efforts to cover children and give them a real voice and the place they deserve are very limited, for different reasons. Instead, state bodies, politicians, and NGOs do the talking for the children.

Unfortunately, although ethical issues have certainly improved with respect to previous coverage, juvenile crime and justice still seems to be a magnet for the press. In the overall spirit of daily publications, where crime reporting is pervasive and its coverage is sensational, articles where minors are victims or perpetrators cannot escape this trend.

Another perceivable trend in the coverage of minors in Albanian media is that of patronizing them. While there is a growing number of articles that show that journalists have taken upon themselves to further a cause or a specific case, the line between preserving dignity of minors and assisting them is a very blurred one.