

Online media in Albania – an overview

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The establishment of the first news websites in Albania dates back to 1999-2000. The creation of the first ISPs in 1998 (ISP – Internet Service Provider), such as Adanet or Abissnet led to the introduction of internet services to the market. As a result, this led to the increase in the number of users and in massive interest in services of the World Wide Web. Traditional media were among the first media actors to turn to the internet, not just to benefit from its advantages and services, but also to create their online space or windows. Gazeta Shqiptare, Shekulli, Koha Jonë and Korrieri were the first media in the country to start their internet websites during 1999-2000. At present 22 national daily newspapers, four national television stations, and most of the local newspapers, radio or television stations are available on the net with their websites. Furthermore, individual initiatives in the online information world are expanding and growing on a daily basis.

The *boom* of social media in recent years has transformed the approach and preferences of online audiences. Very quickly, social media grabbed the “lion’s share” in the number of visitors and time spent online. According to Alexa.com, the ranking of the top fifteen websites in Albania at the beginning of February 2013 was the following:

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| 1. Facebook | 9. Ikub |
| 2. YouTube | 10. Blogspot |
| 3. Google | 11. NOA |
| 4. Google.al | 12. Wikipedia |
| 5. Yahoo | 13. Shekulli On-Line |
| 6. Windows Live | 14. Gazeta Tema |
| 7. BalkanWeb | 15. Shqiptarja.com |
| 8. Top Channel | |

As it can be seen, out of the top fifteen websites Albanians visit, eight are the websites of global platforms or social media, five are the websites of traditional Albanian media websites, and two are individual websites that represent authentic creations and have nothing to do with any traditional media. One cannot but notice that in this ranking of the Albanian list, social network Facebook and the video-sharing platform YouTube are at the very top. This means that social media, at present, are among the most frequent online activities in Albania. This development deserves a deeper and more detailed research in order to comprehend the Albanians’ online approach mechanism and the interests that guide their online preferences.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA ON THE INTERNET

Following the example and experience of the best known global media, Albanian media outlets created their online websites in order to preserve their importance in the online media ecosystem, too. Partially due to the vision of some of the leading media outlets and partially “out of habit” or audience loyalty to the traditional media brands, some of their websites currently are listed among the most clicked websites by Albanian internet users. Thus, the websites of Balkanweb, Top Channel, Shekulli, Tema, as well as that of the newspaper

Shqiptarja.com, which has been in the market for about one year, are among the top fifteen websites in Albania.

A general trend of the websites of the country's main newspapers and television stations is the annual growth of the number of online visitors, which points to an increasingly great shift of the audiences of these media outlets from traditional platforms to web platforms. The table below represents data on the number of visits for the four most visited websites of traditional Albanian media outlets.

Website	Total number of visits per month: 15 January 2013 – 15 February 2013
www.top-channel.tv	2 098 700
www.balkanweb.com	1 736 500
www.gazetatema.net	1 278 100
www.shekulli.com.al	1 173 400

Source: www.trafficestimate.com

According to another source – Compete.com – for the month of January 2013, all of the listed websites feature a considerable increase in the number of unique users compared to January 2012; the increase varies from 34 % up to 61 %. So, on a joint approximate average, these websites have almost doubled the figure. The website gazetatema.net had the largest growth, with about 61 percent more unique visitors. The slowest growth among the four websites was that of balkanweb.com with 34%. The trend of the increased number of unique visitors for these websites, aside from the general trend of audiences shifting toward online platforms, may also be explained by the fact that these websites stand out for the speed of following and publishing the latest news, an essential feature for the existence and success of an online news platform. To a certain extent, the opposition and critical profile of certain media online have also had an impact; that is a preferred profile for a category of the audience. Tema online or Shqiptarja.com may be singled out in this regard.

In recent years, there have also been some developments that have to do with the relation of online platforms of a media outlet to their traditional format. In the beginning the material of traditional media websites was a complete “copy-paste” of the information printed on the pages of newspapers or broadcast on radio and television programs. This copy-paste type of approach only dominated for a few years, until the larger media outlets began to think and create specialized human resources for their websites. These were reporters and editors that would specifically deal with following and publishing the latest news on the web as quickly as possible, in order to benefit from the advantage and possibilities of new technologies in this regard. Currently there are various practices of obtaining and publishing online information coming from traditional formats. For instance, Shekulli online has crated a special button for the print version that it names “Shekulli Print.” Meanwhile, the original information of reporters of the online newsroom makes up most of the information on this website and is identified by noting at the end of every story the phrase “Shekulli online” and then the initials or name of the author or reporter. The website has considerably limited access to stories published in the print format of the newspaper, so that those interested in reading these stories have to buy the newspaper. Mapo newspaper also applies a similar restriction. Meanwhile, other newspaper websites, such as those of Standard, Gazeta Shqiptare, etc. mostly publish the material that appears in the print format.

The website of national television station Top Channel, which has the largest audience among the online traditional media, has created a broad, diverse, and categorized space for the latest news, while it also reserves considerable space to video material of programs broadcast on the television channel. Other television channels, such as TV Klan or Vizion Plus, apply this approach, but the original material produced by the online newsroom and choices are fewer compared to Top Channel, which also explains to some extent the large difference in the number of unique visitors.

Meanwhile, Balkanweb, founded in February 2000, appears mostly as an original website. Although it was established by a traditional media company that owned a newspaper, a radio station, and a television station, the website has its own newsroom and mainly relies on information it produces itself; it also obtains material from the traditional media outlets owned by the same company. It should be noted that this original profile has had considerable impact on the preferences of the Albanian online audience, which had Balkanweb its number one choice for a long time. The drop in the audience growth rate of this portal may also be explained by the change in its editorial policy, especially during the last year.

The majority of websites of Albanian media outlets, in their efforts to follow and benefit from the web's technological advantages, have applied numerous interactive techniques and solutions. They offer options such as "Share" for sharing their information through the social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, or direct messaging. Most of the websites also offer opportunities and space for attracting feedback or opinions by readers.

Information published online is increasingly accompanied by photos, video, graphic illustrations, or multimedia applications. However, it should be noted that such products are often not authentic. There are numerous cases of photos, videos, multimedia applications accompanying information are taken from the internet, often without any regard or respect for copyright rules. Furthermore, there is a general delay in the training or investment in creating the multi-task and multimedia journalist who is so indispensable for web journalism.

Human resources of Albanian news websites remain limited. Although official statistics are lacking, unofficial statements by senior management or the employees of these media outlets indicate that online media newsrooms are smaller in human resources than traditional platforms' newsrooms and their number varies from 5 to 20 persons. From the economic efficiency standpoint, most of the websites state they are losing money, or, in the best case scenario, they just cover their own expenses. Online advertising remains a modest source of income. Only websites with a high level of traffic, such as Balkanweb or Top Channel, have managed to attract advertising, which mainly comes from powerful advertisers, such as mobile phone companies, banks, private universities, etc. Businesses in general, with few exceptions, do not appear to be present in online advertising.

In terms of content, websites, just like the traditional media they belong to, continue to be dominated by information of a political character and crime news. In other words, there is a prevalence of commentary journalism or that feeding off of information from press conferences, press statements, or events by political forces, as well as releases by the police, courts, or prosecutor's offices. In practice, this type of journalism requires less spending than field or investigative journalism and the economic factor could be a partial explanation of its dominance. However, another important factor is particularly editorial policy oriented toward and often dependent upon political forces in the country. The extreme politicization of the

Albanian society itself and the preference of a large share of the audience to follow or engage in political debates also have their significant impact.

From an ethical standpoint, there is a great difference between the online and offline versions of a traditional media. Thus, some of the newspapers are more careful with regard to respect for ethical rules in their print format. However, when you move on to their website, one notices that care for ethics fades and it appears as if these media outlets use their online space also to discharge content that they would normally not print on paper. A major problem is that of online comments, which feature loads of hate speech and personal attacks, verbal violence, unethical stereotypes and prejudice, extremist and fundamentalist propaganda or messages, vulgar and banal language, etc. In recent years, most of the newspapers closer to the opposition, such as Tema, Shqip, Shqiptarja.com, Shekulli, etc., are publishing online almost any type of comment without any moderation or filtering. In the case of Shekulli, although there is minimal care for ethics, one does notice regress as for a long time the online newspaper was similar to a school of ethics for the others, a situation that has changed at present.

INDIVIDUAL NEWS WEBSITES

The Albanian online information space in the past decade has witnessed the birth of many websites that are the products of individuals not affiliated with any traditional media, but have the tendency, desire, and passion to join free initiatives in online media. Some of the individual websites today have managed to be on the top list of websites most visited by Albanians online. Ikub.al, founded in 2006, aside from the latest news, also publishes a broad spectrum of useful information, including local and hyperlocal information, responding to the needs of users of such information. Meanwhile NOA.al (also founded in 2006) has been conceived as an online news agency and presently has more visitors than any other website of the same profile. With an increasing audience, some news websites and individual news portals have also managed to create their own profile in the online information market, such as gazetastart.com, albeu.com, lajmifundit.com, alblajm.com, etc.

Individual websites stand out for more equidistant and balanced reporting compared to traditional media websites. They appear less affected by politics and economic or other interests.

A major problem for these websites is the generation of sufficient revenue to ensure their survival or to invest in technology or human resources. Advertising or other sources of revenue are scarce. Dardan Malaj, founder of lajmifundit.al says business companies in Albania are not yet familiar with the opportunities of online advertising. “Only mobile telephony companies and some banks have a special budget for online advertising. Other companies still prefer to advertise on TV and newspapers. Although the monthly cost of an online advertisement is the same amount as the daily cost of an advertisement in the newspaper, the online advertising market remains small.”

Idaver Sherifi, owner of Albeu.com, in an interview for the newspaper Reporteri says: “Until now, in spite of all the troubles, we’ve managed to survive; however, in the future, with the increase of staff, this would become even more difficult. For that reason, we’re looking at other ways of funding, such as offering various services that generate additional income. That would help us not be dependent upon advertising...This has to do with offering certain

services for a payment.” Regarding engaged or employed staff, he says, “Until 2006, I maintained the portal myself. After 2006, I engaged three other persons, friends of mine, without any payment, volunteers. They collaborated with me until 2009. In 2009, together with my friends, we got offices, registered with the court, and hired three persons. There are now 8 persons who work in the newsroom with shifts. We also have four other persons working elsewhere and are sources of information for us.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Currently, there are 22 national daily newspapers, four national television stations, and most of the local newspapers, radio stations or television stations, that have their own website. A general trend in leading newspaper and television websites in the country is the annual increase in the number of online visitors, which indicates a growing shift in the audience of these media outlets from traditional platforms to online platforms.

The tendency of an increasing number of online unique visitors to these websites, aside from the general trend of audiences moving online, can also be explained by the fact that these websites stand out for the speed of following and publishing the latest news, a feature that is key to the existence and success of an online news platform. To a certain extent, the opposition and critical profile of certain online media have also played a role; it is a preferred profile for a category of the audience. Typical cases here could be Tema online or Shqiptarja.com newspapers. In terms of content, websites, just like the traditional media outlets they belong to, are still dominated by information of a political character as well as crime reporting.

The majority of Albanian media websites, in their efforts to benefit from the advantages of web technology, have applied numerous interactive techniques and solutions. However, there is a general delay in the training of or investment in the creation of multi-task and multimedia journalists, which are considered indispensable for web journalism. Human resources of Albanian news websites remain limited. In terms of economic efficiency, most of the websites state they are losing money or, in the best case scenario, they simply manage to cover their own expenses.

From an ethical standpoint, there is a great difference between the online and offline versions of a media outlet. Thus, some of the newspapers are more careful with regard to respect for ethical rules in their print format. However, when you move on to their website, one notices that care for ethics fades and it appears as if these media outlets use their online space also to discharge content that they would normally not print on paper. Individual websites stand out for more equidistant and balanced reporting compared to traditional media websites. They appear less affected by politics and economic or other interests. A major problem for these websites is the generation of sufficient income to ensure their survival or to invest in technology or human resources, which are still minimal.