



SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEIR USE BY ALBANIAN MEDIA



Albanian Media Institute
Instituti Shqiptar i Medias

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The Internet has brought about significant changes to the Albanian media echosystem too. The number of communication and information actors and platforms in the country has multiplied. The ways in which information is produced, consumed and disseminated have also changed. Besides traditional media, social media are assuming an increasingly greater role in the process of informing the public. For traditional media, these new media are being formed as new channels of connecting to audiences and distributing content. Yet, social media appear also as an important channel for the dissemination of content produced by users and the broader public.

This study takes it upon itself to present a general overview of the development of online media and social media in Albania, focusing particularly on how professional media outlets use social media. The empirical research focused on monitoring the most widely used social media in Albania, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, Instagram and the blogosphere, as well as the six leading online media in Albania, namely top-channel.tv, balkanweb.com, shekulli.com.al, panorama.com.al, albeu.com, and shqiptarja.com. The monitoring covers a one-year period extending from August 2014 to August 2015.

1. Background

The speed and pace of development of online media in Albania was closely related to the pace and speed of the development of internet technology as well as to the evolution of the country's economic and social-cultural context. In the process of Internet penetration in Albania, two phases clearly stand out: the first phase begins with the country's first connection to the Internet in 1993 and continues up to 2007. The second phase began in 2007 and continues to date.

During the first phase, dial-up connections (through telephone lines) were applied in the country to provide Internet service. The Internet was still for elites and only a small part of the broad public could have access to it. The slowness of the process and scarce public or private investment for the distribution of the internet led to the first phase of the web Web 1.0, which was characterized by very slow speed and the static web, which took longer than in other countries in Europe. This led to a somewhat delayed contact of Albanian users with social media on the internet, which in 2003-2004 saw an unmatched outburst in developed countries.

Some of the most important moments of the history of the distribution of the Internet in Albania during the first phase are found in an official report of the representative of Albania's Telecommunications Regulatory Entity (TRE) in the International Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) held in Moscow during 16-19 September 2003.¹ The report discovers that the first international connection with the Internet in Albania took place in 1993. This was a joint project of the Department of Informatics

1. http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/___e-strategy/internet/Seminars/Moscow/

of the University of Tirana and the EARN Center in Pisa, Italy.² The connection to the Internet in this project was enabled through telephone lines, but the connection only worked for some months.

According to the same source, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided the Internet service in the country for the first time in 1996. One year later, the Soros Foundation provided free Internet service for civil society organizations, the media and the university.

The first private company to provide commercial Internet service was ICC (Intellectual Communications Center) and its service began in 1998.³ Immediately after it, there were other ISP (Internet Service Provider), namely ADA-Net, AbissNet and ABCom. It should be noted that two of the first four ISPs were founded by companies that also possessed media outlets, as is the case of Abissnet, whose owner was also the owner of Shekulli newspaper, or the case of ADA-Net that owned the Klan media group. This shows that the actors operating in the media field were among the first to enter the Internet realm and market.⁴

Some institutional and legal initiatives during this period also had an role in the development of the Internet. Thus, in 1997, the Assembly approved the law “On telecommunications in the Republic of Albania.” During the same year, the Telecommunications Regulatory Entity (TRE) was also founded and created an institutional basis for developments in this area and preceded strategic privatizations and the issuance of new licenses for Internet services, fixed telephony

2. Report of the Albanian TRE representative at the conference of ITU (International Telecommunication Union), Moscow, 2003. http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/___e-strategy/internet/Seminars/Moscow/ Accessed on 01.08.2015

3. Ibid

4. *Development of the Internet and social media in Albania*, AMI, 2015

and mobile telephony.⁵

The very limited spread of the Internet during the first phase is also linked with the limited spread of information technology and communications in the country. In 2000, Albania had 1 computer in 1800 inhabitants,⁶ while in the same year the average of the 15 EU member countries was at 286 computers per 1000 inhabitants.⁷

The broad public, businesses and institutions began to have greater access to the Internet only after 2000, when besides private ISPs, the Internet was being provided also by the state operator AlbTelekom. It was at this time that some private service sites called “Internet Café” were opened and provided Internet service charging per hours used. Yet, access of Albanian families to the Internet remained at a low level until 2007. The fixed broadband connection, which had been applied in Western countries since 2001, bringing with it the shift of the Web to its second phase Web 2.0, had seen very slow and limited spread in Albania. The number of subscribers with Internet access through the fixed broadband connection in 2007 was only 1800.⁸

A turning point in the spread of the Internet in the country was the privatization of the sole state-owned telecommunications operator, AlbTelekom in 2007, which led to a multiplication of investments, market liberalization, reduction of service prices and another vision

5. Tartari, Alban, *Internet in Albania and its use by the media – background and present*, Albanological Studies, Publication 5, “History of the media and mediatization of history,” Tirana 2012

6. Report of the Albanian TRE representative at the conference of ITU (International Telecommunication Union), Moscow, 2003. http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/_e-strategy/internet/Seminars/Moscow/ Accessed on 01.08.2015

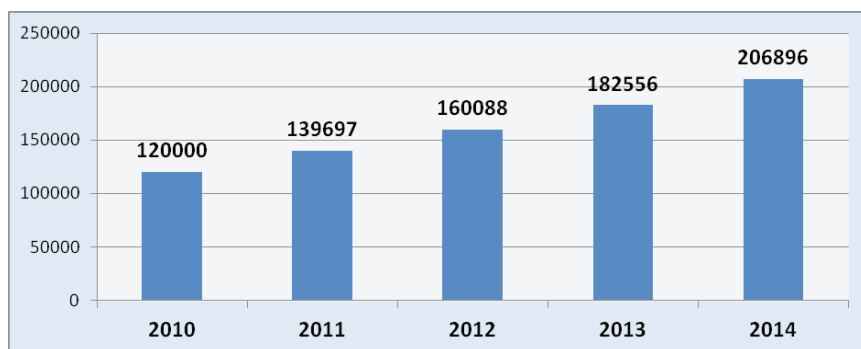
7. Deiss, Richard, *Rapid growth of Internet and mobile phone usage in Candidate Countries in 2000*, found at <http://www.uni-mannheim.de/edz/pdf/statinf/01/KS-NP-01-037-EN-I-EN.pdf> Accessed on 18.17.2015

8. EPCA, Annual Report, 2014

for the development of the Internet and the telecommunications industry in general. Until 2012, the company invested about 150 million Euros and continues to invest for updates or expansion of the network, for adding capacities throughout the country's territory, the preparation of infrastructure, for providing the latest technology services, and for improving the service infrastructure, etc. Albtelecom's fiber optic backbone network that extends to and covers the entire territory of Albania and reaches over 3000 km in the country's territory, of which 600 km is an international network that connects to neighboring countries. In 2007, when the company was privatized, the company had only 500 km of fiber optic cables.⁹

The greatest investments in recent years have been made to increase Internet access through the fixed broadband connection as well as broadband connections through mobile telephony. The number of subscribers to the fixed broadband connection has been increasing steadily in recent years. The graphic below illustrates that trend:

Number of subscribers connected through fixed broadband connection



Source: EPCA: Annual activity review for 2014

In 2014, compared to 2013, there was an increase of 13.3%.

9. <http://www.albtelecom.al/al/treguesit/87-rreth-albtelecom/historiku/134-historiku>

Meanwhile, latest data published by EPCA (Electronic and Postal Communications Authority) in its July 2015 report speak about continued growth even during the first half of 2015. Thus, according to this report, the number of subscribers having fixed broadband access until June 2015 reached 227,905 from 206,896 at the end of 2014.¹⁰

The table below presents more detailed data, divided by main Internet operator subscribers in the country:

Number of subscribers having fixed broadband access by operator

	Albtelecom	Abcom	Abissnet	ASC	Other OA's	Total Broadband Fiks
2010	70,597	13,575	7,000	5,666	23,162	120,000
2011	60,055	29,321	15,321	10,129	24,871	139,697
2012	66,757	35,870	17,719	11,777	27,965	160,088
2013	73,242	43,430	20,562	15,432	29,890	182,556
2014	82,118	47,480	23,259	26,379	27,660	206,896
Difference 2013/2014	12%	9%	13%	71%	-7%	13.3%

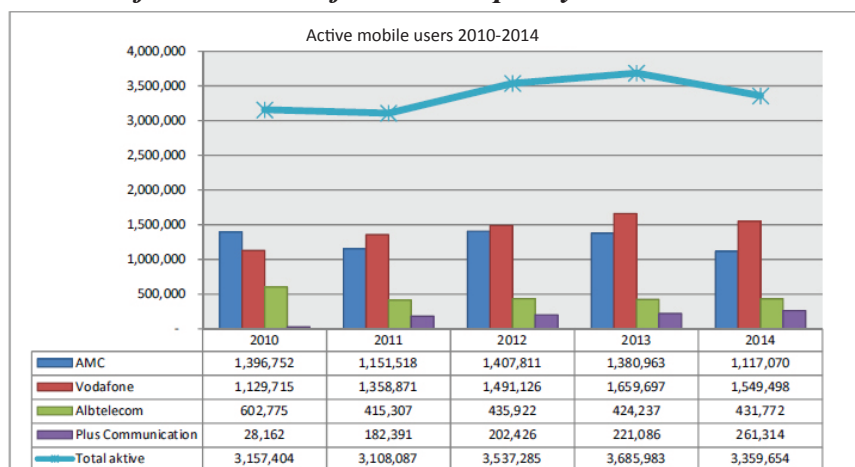
Source: EPCA: Annual activity report for 2014

As can be seen, AlbTelecom remains the most powerful fixed broadband operator in the country; yet, Abcom, Abissnet and ASC also have a strong standing in the market. Although the number of Internet access service providers is large (about 80 active operators), the four largest operators possess 87% of this market. All main operators have seen growth from one year to the other, thus reflecting the tendency of subscribers for greater access to this service.

10. EPCA, *Statistical indicators of the electronic communications market – 2nd Quarter 2015*, Link: <http://www.akep.al/images/stories/AKEP/statistika/2015/raporti-QII-2015-300715.pdf> Accessed on 05.08.2015

The spread of mobile telephony has made a great contribution to the growth of Internet penetration in the country. Albania ranks among the countries with highest mobile telephony penetration among the population. Although during 2014 there was a decline compared to 2013 in terms of the number of mobile telephony users, the number is still high vis-à-vis the population number. Thus, in a population of about 3 million, during 2014, Albania had about 4 883 843 users by SIM cards, of which 3 370 970 were active users. A more detailed panorama regarding the number of active mobile telephony users is presented in the table below, whereby data is divided also per the four operators:

Number of active users of mobile telephony

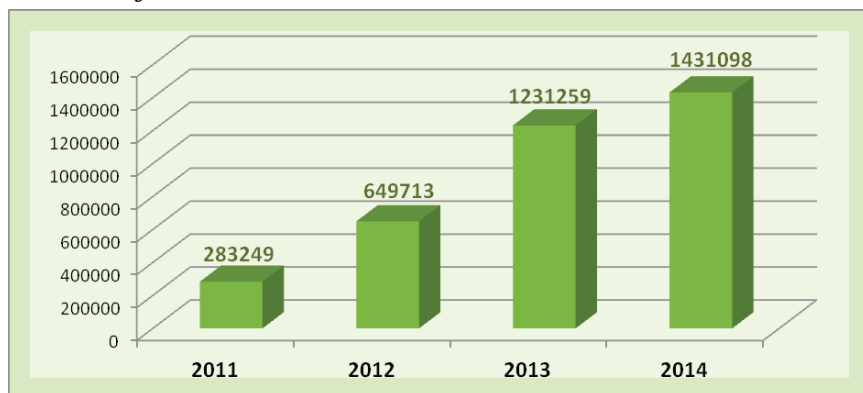


Source: EPCA: Annual activity report for 2014

After 2010, mobile telephony companies began to provide broadband Internet connection through mobile telephony, which should be said, has had considerable influence on the immediate jump in the number of Albanians having access to the Internet. One after the other, AMC, Vodafone and Eagle – and Plus afterwards – provided

3G technology for the majority of their subscribers, moving at the start of 2015 to 4G service. The graphic below provides the growing trend with regard to the number of users through 3G broadband connection through mobile telephony:

Number of subscribers with 3G broadband access



Source: EPCA: Annual activity report for 2014

As may be seen from the table, the number 3G Internet users through mobile phones marked an impressive growth within 3 years. This number, from 283 249 in 2011 reached 1 431 098 in, marking an increase by over 5 times or 500%.

Data from ITU (International Telecommunication Union) also shows Albania is one of the countries with the highest Internet penetration growth in recent years. This led to Internet access in the country to go up to 60.10% of the population in the beginning of 2014.¹¹ The World Bank also confirms the data.¹² According to these sources, the number of Internet users during this period in Albania reached 1 815 145 of the 3 020 209 inhabitants the country had in total. The global

11. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>, accessed on 06.02.2015

12. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>, accessed on 06.02.2015

average of access to the Internet during that period was estimated at 42.3 % of the world's population, while the average in Europe reached 70.5 %.

In terms of the frequency of use, the Internet is the second most used after television for Albanian audiences. According to a survey conducted by the Open Society Foundation for Albania in 2014, about 42 percent of users used the Internet everyday or almost everyday. The EU average for this indicator during that period was at 57 %.¹³ According to the same source, Albanian audiences spent about 29.8 hours a month on PC-accessed Internet, in other words, approximately 1 hour a day.

With regard to the parameters of internet services, such as upload speed and download speed, they slowly followed the Internet penetration pace. Thus, according to Ookla Netindex, the download speed on broadband Internet on October 25, 2014, was 8.0 Mbps, while upload speed was 4.7 Mbps. The download speed for Internet on mobile devices on that day was 4.7 Mbps while upload speed was 1.5.

At the global level, the download speed for broadband Internet on the same day was 21.2 Mbps while upload speed was 9.7 Mbps. Download speed on mobile devices on that day was 10.4 Mbps while upload speed was 4.2 Mbps. As may be seen, with regard to speed parameters, the growth rates are still slow, creating an evident difference with Western countries in this regard.

Besides these technological aspects, some state and government stimulating policies have also contributed to the spread of the Internet in the country. These policies began to have a role in this

13. Open Society Foundation - Albania, *Final report: National survey on perceptions & expectations towards a potential EU membership of Albania*, Sept. 2014, Tirana

regard especially after 2003, which is when the National Strategy for Information and Communication Technology was approved. Of most impact was the Cross-Sector Strategy for the Information Society 2008-2013, which, through different programs and projects, such as Gov-net1, Gov-net2, E-government, E-schools, etc., led to the connection on the same network of many state institutions and the application of some public services online; it also helped with spreading the Internet also to the country's education institutions.

Many activities, such as registration of businesses, issuance of licenses, declaration of taxes, the computerization of the national population register and the address system, all began to be conducted online. In the context of the project E-schools, undertaken in cooperation with UNDP and MES, in January 2009, the Ministry of Education purchased 2000 laptops for computer labs of schools in order to achieve the ratio 1 computer per 25 students from 1 per 45 that it was at the time. After 2003, knowledge on information and communication technology were incorporated also in school curricula at all levels.

2. Massive media and online media in Albania

The Albanian media landscape is rich and diverse. After the fall of communism and the establishment of the pluralistic democratic system, a large number of newspapers, television and radio stations were opened in the country. At present, only the Public Radio and Television (RTSH) and the Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA) are public media outlets while all the rest are privately owned.

The first free and pluralistic media were founded in 1991, immediately after the fall of communism. They were mainly newspapers belonging to the new political parties that had just been founded. Other private and independent media outlets emerged afterwards.

At present, the total number of newspapers and magazines published across the country is estimated above two hundred.¹⁴ A list of all press titles published in the Albanian language (a total of 209) is published on Wikipedia.¹⁵ However, the list includes not only those published in Albania but also outside of Albania's borders. There are also a few titles that are presently in the market but appear to be missing from the list.

A total of 26 national newspapers are published in Albania, a very high figure in terms of the general number of the population. There are no certified and official figures regarding the circulation and sales of newspapers. Newspaper newsrooms do not have an obligation to publish the number of sold copies and there is no official authority that deals with the verification of such data.¹⁶ According to one

14. Godole, Jonila, *Albanian journalism in transition*, Papirus, 2014

15. http://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_e_gazetave_shqip

16. Londo, Ilda, *Albania in*: Petkovic, B. (Ed.), *Media integrity matters*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2014

source, the best selling newspaper in the country does not go beyond 20,000 copies per day, while most of the newspapers sell less than 1000 copies per day.¹⁷

With regard to television media, at the end of 2014, Albania had 2 national television stations, 2 satellite television stations, 1 foreign television station (TV5 MONDE) and 66 local television stations on analogue broadcasts as well as 83 cable television stations.¹⁸ In Albania, there is also one public television station (TVSH), which has three affiliate branches in three cities of the country. At present, broadcast media are in the process of moving from analogue broadcasts to digital broadcasts, which has been delayed beyond the established deadline of June 2015. In spite of that, for a number of years now, the country has three commercial digital platforms: Digitalb, Tring and Supersport.

Two national commercial radio stations, 1 public national radio station and 71 local radio stations also operate in Albania on FM.

According to the survey conducted by the Open Society Foundation for Albania, television remains the most used medium of information for the Albanian audiences. Thus, 89 percent of Albanians watch television everyday or almost everyday, a figure that ranks Albania sixth in Europe for this indicator.¹⁹

After the introduction of the Internet in Albania, most of the traditional media outlets demonstrated an interest therein and began efforts to create their online space. The Albanian massmedia began to discover the internet, with its benefits and risks, somewhere in

17. Godole, Jonila, *Albanian journalism in transition*, Papirus, 2014

18. Source: AMA (Audiovisual Media Authority), www.ama.gov.al

19. Open Society Foundation - Albania, *Final report: National survey on perceptions & expectations towards a potential EU membership of Albania*, Sept. 2014, Tirana

the middle of the 1990s. The public's access to the Internet and the massmedia's access have walked in parallel during this time, although the media has been somewhat more advanced compared to the general public.

ATA (Albanian Telegraphic Agency) was the first media outlet that succeeded in getting online during this period. Thanks to cooperation with TelPress in Italy and HR-Net in Greece, in 1996, ATA provided for the first time news on Albania internationally.²⁰

Shortly after, the press too found its niche on the Internet. The first to create their websites online were the newspapers *Shekulli*, *Korrieri*, *Koha Jonë*, *Gazeta Shqiptare* and *Klan* magazine, all of which took place during the period January through December 1999. In February 2000, Carlo Bollino, director of *Gazeta Shqiptare*, with support from the Soros Foundation, founded the first Albanian news portal called *BalkanWeb*. The novelty of this website was that it had been conceived as an online news agency that had no direct connection with any traditional media outlet and that would soon have its own newsroom as well as its original articles or material, aside from what could be obtained from other mother company media outlets.²¹

Among television stations, the first to create their own websites were *Top Channel* and *Vizion Plus*, both in 2001. Radio stations got online only a few years after and their websites have not managed to get any considerable number of visits. The first radio stations that created their own websites were *Top Albania Radio*, *Club FM Radio*, *Radio Plus 2*, and *Radio Tirana*. "An encouragement for invigorating online services of Albanian radio stations, researcher

20. Tartari, Alban, *Internet in Albania and use by media – history and current*, Albanological Studies, Publication 5 "History of the media and mediatisation of history," 2012

21. *Online journalism in Albanian*, AMI, 2014

Arben Muka says, were the newsrooms of foreign radio stations that carried Albanian language programs, such as *BBC*, *DW*, *Voice of America*, etc., which carried rich and updated information on their websites.”²²

The table below presents some of the first Albanian media outlets that went online and the respective time of their foundation:

Some of the first Albanian online media outlets and the time of their foundation

Online media outlet	Date/time of start	Ownership
shekulli.com.al	1999	Koço Kokëdhima
kohajone.com	November 1999	Nikollë Lesi
korrieri.com	1999	N/A
balkanweb.com	February 2000	FOCUS GROUP
top-channel.tv	December 2001	TOP MEDIA GROUP
vizionplus.al	2001	Vizion Plus
panorama.com.al	2002	PANORAMA GROUP
albeu.com	July 4, 2003	Idaver Sherifi

Source: Questionnaire-interviews with principal officials or representatives of Albanian online media outlets, organized by AMI, 2014

Besides the companies of traditional media outlets, there were also individuals who created their news websites; these were either individuals who were not connected to any traditional media outlet or journalists or analysts who wished to exploit the capacities of the Internet to create new online media outlets. This group of online media outlets that were born on the web currently represents an important part of the spectrum of Albanian online media. The

22. Muka, Arben, *Dynamics of radio broadcasts in Albania*, AMI, 2013

number of these outlets has increased especially in the past two or three years. Besides the known names of this category, such as albeu.com, noa.al, lajmifundit.al, gazetastart.com, etc., newer online news portals are also gaining popularity such as lapsi.al, droni.al, newsbomb.al, etc.

At present, the corps of “*purely online media*” is being shaped as one of the most dynamic in the Albanian online space, leading to increasingly frequent novelties and developments. While the websites of traditional media outlets completed the cycle of their appearance online and no new names are expected of them, media outlets born on the web are growing with each passing day and are becoming powerful online information actors, thus competing with the websites of traditional media outlets in many ways.

Online media in Albania are also appearing as a new employment space for human resources in the field of journalism. According to researcher Jonila Godole, about 7.5% of the total number of reporters in Albania was estimated to be working in online media outlets.²³ Two years later, a round of interviews with heads of online media outlets in Albania, conducted by the Albanian Media Institute, discovered that the number of full-time or part-time reporters working in online media outlets in 2014 was about 180 persons.²⁴ Based on data from the Union of Albanian Journalists, which states that the total number of reporters working in Albania is about 1500,²⁵ it results that in 2014, about 12% of the total number of reporters working in Albanian online media outlets.

In terms of their economic model, online media in Albania are yet to develop a clear and independent model. The main source of

23. Godole, Jonila, *Albanian journalism in transition*, Tiranë, Papirus, 2014

24. *Online journalism in Albania*, AMI, 2014

25. Cited in: Godole, Jonila, *Albanian journalism in transition*, Tiranë, Papirus, 2014

their income remains that of traditional media outlets: advertising. Meanwhile, in merged newsrooms, the economic activity of online media is not separated from the economic activity of traditional media outlets that are part of the same ownership. Modest incomes have also led to the staff of reporters and human resources being generally still small. For instance, we may mention the case of balkanweb.com; although it is one of the most visited online media outlets in Albania, its staff only includes 5 reporters.²⁶ However, in the context of mergers, the portal also publishes content produced by the staff of other media outlets that are part of the same media company. For instance, most of the video content on this website are from the television station News24.

Besides these general tendencies, during the past two or three years, there have also been some notable developments that have had no minor impact on the online media echosystem in Albania.

First, one notices a tendency and initiative of part of known names from media and journalism ranks to create their own online space or media outlet. The fact that the cost for the creation of a web portal or blog online is very small has had a role in this tendency. It is common knowledge that to found a television station, a radio station or a newspaper, one needs considerable capital, which may reach even millions of dollars. On the other hand, to establish a website, you only need the domain name and the hosting of the website on a server, all of which cost less than 100 dollars. Armand Shkullaku, a journalist, analyst and a senior person of several traditional media outlets, and recently co-founder of one of the newest online media outlets lapsi.al, says: “I think that today there is a very great opportunity to enter a race that is equal for all, not only in Albania but anywhere in the world, with much less financial costs. In other words, it is the same: whether here in Tirana, someone else in

26. *Online journalism in Albania*, AMI, 2014

Frankfurt, Paris, Rome, Milan or New York, has the same possibility. So financially speaking, in terms of building the infrastructure, it is almost equal for all.”²⁷

However, it appears that one important factor in the tendency of journalism professionals to create their own online media outlets is the initiative to create a media outlet that is free from existing editorial policies of existing traditional media outlets. These editorial policies have often served as a kind of censorship mechanisms on reporters or they have led to self-censorship among news professionals. On the other hand, the Internet gives them the possibility to free themselves of these “chains” and exercise their duty to the public with more integrity. Shkullaku stresses that the online media “is a media that may be done even by those journalists who did not have the possibility and necessary space to express themselves freely, to speak their views, because of editorial policies.” Becoming free from such editorial policies has led also to the birth of online media outlets that have stood out for strong opposition to government policies, such as Tema online or opozita.com.

Known journalists or analysts who have explored and are currently using online space to communicate directly with the public include names such as Mustafa Nano, Ardian Vehbiu, Fatos Lubonja, Armand Shkullaku, Andi Bushati, Mero Baze, Mentor Kikia, Sami Neza, Anila Basha, etc.

Second, in recent years, there is *a tendency to consolidate relatively undeveloped genres of the Albanian online media*, such as for instance, online magazines, blogs, etc. The most known and visited blogs in Albania were created by known journalists or analysts who are using the online media also as a meeting point

27. Interview with Armand Shkullaku in “Takimi i pasdites” on TV Klan, January 28, 2014, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvSPPVVnmqc>, accessed on February 16, 2015.

with fans or the rest of the audience.

Besides blogs, online magazines have also seen considerable growth recently. For instance, *anabel.al*, the most visited online magazine (webzine) in Albania, represents a case of success and innovation with regard to this genre on the web. Launched in 2010, the magazine has an original approach and content. The content on the website is diverse and generally targets female audience, but the webzine also includes content of interest to the broader public. Prevailing topics include soft news, fashion, lifestyle, entertainment, celebrity news, etc. Another title among online magazines that has also seen growth is *living.al*, founded in August 2012, by the Tring Communications company. Information published on this site relates to living and living premises, making the magazine the only one with this profile. This webzine, besides content from the print edition of the magazine, also publishes the most notable news in its field.

Third, we note a *tendency to create specialized online outlets*, thus parting from the generalistic nature of most current online media outlets. One such case is *bota.al*, which represents one of the newest applications of online specialized news. Founded in 2013, the website publishes mainly information having to do with international developments, thus contributing to filling the void that exists presently in the Albanian online space for international news. As noted in the introduction by its publisher, *bota.al* is a non-profit online platform, engaged in publishing in Albanian articles, reportages, commentaries, analyses by world authors, with regard to current affairs, focusing particularly on diplomacy and the economy. Articles of a historical character, on events and characters who have had indisputable impact on the history of the world, take up a major part of the *bota.al* space.²⁸

Lajmepolitike.com is another attempt to create a specialized online

28. <http://www.bota.al/kush-jemi/>

media outlet. As may be seen in the name, the website only deals with political news. It belongs to the “purely online media” category and was founded in September 2012 by the Association of Journalists and Political Researchers, operating as an activity of this NPO. The newsroom has 6 reporters and 1 webmaster in its staff.²⁹

Fourth, given the fact that online media generate very little income and find it difficult to ensure their survival, in recent years there have been experiments to *create online media outlets as non-profit activities* in the context of various NPOs. Such media are maintained by donations secured through applications by the NPO. The most known online media that function through this funding scheme include the blog respublica.al, the portal gazetaidea.com, etc. How long can such a model last from an economic standpoint? The future will answer this important dilemma regarding their functioning.

29. Data was taken from interview-questionnaires organized by the author with the support of the Albanian Media Institute

3. Social media in Albania

The move to broadband Internet and to Web 2.0 marked a major development of social media and user-generated content in Albania too. The rate of social media penetration in the country has increased considerably, particularly during the last five years, reaching 45 percent of the population in February 2014. The figure is higher than the European average, which was at 40% at the time. The number of social media users during this period was estimated at 1 400 000 persons. Thus, from being one of the countries with the lowest rate of social media penetration, Albania ranked 18th in Europe in 2014, leaving behind in this aspect even developed countries such as Switzerland, France, Italy, Spain, etc. A large part of users, about 980 000 (or approximately 33% of the population) access social media through mobile telephony.³⁰

Among social media, those that have seen the greatest development and have played an important role even for professional media in Albania are social networks, content exchange platforms and the blogosphere.

According to the survey carried out by the Open Society Foundation for Albania the time spent on the Internet by frequent Internet users is divided as follows: the greatest time is spent on Facebook (49 %), followed by YouTube (23 %). According to the survey, it results that the three interpersonal communication and content exchange platforms have found considerable use in Albania: Whatsapp that takes up 11 % of time spent on the Internet, Viber (8 %) and Instagram (6 %). The time for reading online newspapers takes up only 6%, while time for reading blogs takes up 4 percent.

30. Source: <http://wearesocial.sg/>. May also be found at the link: <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/social-digital-mobile-in-europe>

Below we will see in greater detail the level of development and the current status of the most important social media groups.

3.1. Social networks

The first social networks in the world, such as Classmate, Six Degrees, Live Journal, etc. were founded in the second half of the 1990s. However, the real outburst of social networks was marked after 2001, when the broadband connection to the Internet was tested for the first time in Britain successfully; it offered a much higher degree of interactivity and a speed that was tens of times higher for transmitting data on the web. From 2002 to 2004, many social global networks emerged, among which particularly popular were networks such as Friendster, Hi5, MySpace, etc. Nevertheless, the limited spread of the Internet in Albania until 2007 and its low speed at the time led to this first generation of social networks to not gain massive use and thus go without any notable traces.

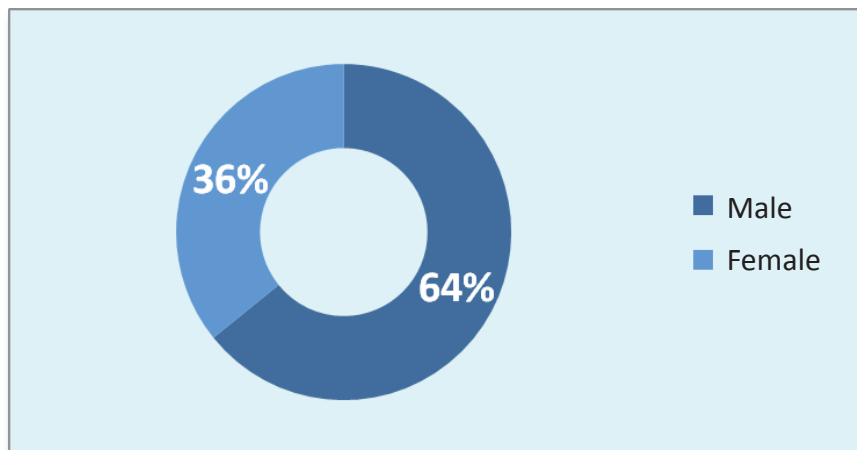
Massive contact with social networks in Albania began after 2007 and they were of such intensity that they ensured very fast popularization of two of the largest networks in the world at the time, namely Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook holds the lion's share in the market and space of social networks in Albania. Statistics speak about a number of users that is several times higher than the number of users of the second most popular network in the country, Twitter.

The level of penetration of Facebook in January 2015 reached about 45% of the population. The number of Facebook users reached about 1 340 000. Of these, about 860 000 were male and 480 000 were female.³¹

31. *Source: Facebook.com*

Percentage of male and female users on Facebook



Source: Facebook.com

The highest number of users, about 980 000 belong to the 18 – 34 age group. This age group takes up about 73% of the general number of Facebook users in Albania. Such an age disbalance also talks about a high degree of the “digital divide” between younger age groups and the older ones.³²

In Albania, Facebook is widely used by individual users as well as by political, art, media, private business and other actors. Among Facebook pages with most fans are some pages of artists, politicians, media outlets, entertainment and fashion pages, as well as some pages of commercial computer companies. Thus, according to socialbakers.com, the page with most fans on August 7, 2015 (1 662 747 fans) was that of a computer company, followed by that of artist Ermal Mamaqi (1 650 827 fans).

For the “Media” category, on August 7, 2015, Socialbakers showed

32. *Development of the Internet and social media in Albania*, AMI, 2015

the data presented in the graph below:³³

***Ranking of media outlets by number of Facebook fans,
August 7, 2015***

		Total Fans	Rating
1	 Top Channel	1 030 356	7
2	 Televizioni KLAN	522 604	7
3	 Agjencia Kombëtare e Lajmeve NOA	497 537	4
4	 Gazeta Ora	402 107	6
5	 LajmiFundit	369 492	5
6	 Lady Albania	347 858	10
7	 Albeu.com	220 274	9
8	 VIZION PLUS	211 782	8
9	 Revista Anabel	200 468	10
10	 WRGB CBS 6 News, Albany	112 672	N/A

Source: www.socialbakers.com

As may be seen in the above graphic, the website of television station Top Channel has the highest number of fans on Facebook, followed by TV Klan and the NOA news agency. Among the top ones, three are websites of television stations (Top-Channel, Klan and Vizion Plus), four are websites of the type “digital born” (NOA, Ora Newspaper – Pristina, Lajmi i Fundit and Albeu) and two belong to online magazines (Lady Albania dhe Anabel). None of the newspaper websites appear on the above list, thus reflecting how much Facebook users, who are mainly young, prefer newspapers. Meanwhile, one notices an increased preference for media outlets

33. <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/albania/media/>

that have emerged online as well as webzines (online magazines), which reflects also the preferences of Facebook users for the kind of information they welcome the most.

The other social network that is most popular in the country after Facebook is Twitter. However, the degree of its penetration in the Albanian society continues to remain low. The most visited website, belonging to Albanian-origin artist Tony Dovolani who lives in the United States, on August 7, 2015, had 202 260 followers, a figure that is about five times lower compared to the most visited website on Facebook. In the “Media” category, the number of followers is even smaller. Even in the case of Twitter, the ranking among Albanian media on the same day has Top Channel at the top of the list with 10 721 followers, a figure about 100 times smaller than the number of Facebook fans of the same media outlet.

There are also two other social networks, Google+ and LinkedIn, that have access in the country, but the level of their penetration and impact on online and offline social life is almost negligible.

3.2. Platforms for sharing videos and photos

Among other things, the Internet brought about an extraordinary increase in the public’s participation in the process of the production and dissemination of media content. Most of the bigger publishers of the Internet created special platforms for the publication and dissemination of this content, thus making themselves just publishers while making users play the role of producers and distributors of content. The media are also powerful contributors to these platforms. The best-known platforms for the exchange of user-generated content or professional media generated content are those for the exchange of videos and photos. Among these, the most popular in Albania are YouTube, Instagram and Flickr.











YouTube is the most used social media in Albania after Facebook. Albanian space on YouTube is dominated by content created and distributed by professional media outlets, such as television stations Top Channel and Klan. The Top Channel channel on YouTube leads in terms of subscribers with 135 118 such, followed by Klan TV, which had 77 839 subscribers. However, Klan leads in terms of times uploaded videos are watched, about 108 million, followed by Top Channel, which had about 100 million views³⁴ (see table below). Artists', shows' or special programs' channels also have managed to create considerable audiences, among which one notices the channel of singer Noizy, who leads the YouTube rankings, the "XFactor" show channel of TV Klan, which reached about 22 million views, etc.³⁵

Below is the ranking of the leading Albanian video channels on YouTube according to SocialBakers:

34. <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/youtube/channels/albania/page-1-2/>

35. <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/youtube/channels/albania/>

YouTube Channels Stats in Albania

		Subscribers	Total uploaded video views	Rating
1	 thisisnoizy	201 870	183 715 877	0
2	 RTV KLAN	77 839	107 738 495	0
3	 TopChannelAlbania	135 118	100 747 007	0
4	 Digitalb	63 646	38 430 898	0
5	 xfactoralbania	15 504	22 353 387	0
6	 GoldCinemaAlbania	23 029	5 190 435	N/A
7	 Kolopuca.tv	4 895	4 849 026	0
8	 MAD Albania	5 623	3 094 476	0
9	 Albeu.com	565	1 880 672	0
10	 VodafoneAL	1 870	1 664 829	0

Source: *Socialbakers.com*

Albanian pages on YouTube, besides professional media channels, also feature video posted by thousands of citizens who have become part of citizen media content or participatory journalism. While professional media channels or pages are few but have high viewership, channels or pages of citizens are in the thousands and, although each has much lower visibility than those of professional media outlets, in terms of the total number of videos, they have made a much greater contribution than media channels.

However, a problem has been created with regard to the publication or republication online of video material protected by copyright rules

by citizens. Thus, citizens publish without the permission of authors numerous song clips, videos of television shows, movies, etc. The Albanian Copyright Office has conducted numerous inspections and controls and has punished numerous different subjects for failure to respect copyright, but it has not undertaken any such inspections on online channels or subjects.

The practice of video and audio podcasting, applied successfully by numerous companies in the area of marketing and public relations, has seen considerable development in recent years. Marketing and PR campaigns on YouTube channels by mobile telephony companies are one concrete example of this practice.

Among photo exchange platforms, Instagram is considered the most used in the country. One of the reasons for this is the increase of the number of Internet users through mobile telephony. Within a short period of time, the Instagram website ranks 28th among the websites that are most used by Albanians according to Alexa. Most users of Instagram are young agegroups as well as known personalities from arts and music. Flickr too has managed to have some kind of spread in the country, but this platform is used primarily by organizations and businesses and less by individuals.³⁶

3.3. The Albanian blogosphere

Two practices have been used in the Albanian blogosphere: 1. Creation of independent blogs, which are not part of any other website or portal; 2. There is also the practice of the creation of blogs or forums within portals or different news websites.

Independent blogs have been created mainly by journalists or analysts who use blogs to publish their comments or analyses and

36. *Development of the Internet and social media in Albania*, AMI, 2015

those of blog collaborators, as well as to have a window of direct interaction with their fans or readers. These blogs often publish also commentaries or articles that are rejected by the newsrooms of newspapers or other traditional outlets because of their editorial policies, thus providing an expansion of the dimension of freedom of expression. Some of the best-known blogs in the country in this category are: *respublica.al*, founded in 2010 by known Albanian media analyst Mustafa Nano; *peizazhe.com* (formerly *xhaxhai.wordpress.com*), founded by researchers and media analyst Adrian Vehbiu, *peshkupaujë.com*, created in December 2003 by Penar Musaraj and Blendi Salaj; *perpjekja.blogspot.com* of known analyst Fatos Lubonja and recently *lapsi.al*, founded by analysts Andi Bushati and Armand Shkullaku.

Second tier blogs, as noted, are part or sections of different news websites or portals. In these cases, the *homepage* includes a button called “Blog,” which contains a link that takes you to the blog of the news website or company. This practice has been pursued by *shqiptarja.com*, which is among the few online media outlets that includes a blog inside the website.

The blog of *shqiptarja.com* has a total of 17 categories and postings date back to December 17, 2011. Categories are diverse and encompass a wide variety of topics. The main ones are: Suburbs, PsychoBlog, Urban tips, Beyond news, Ask the doc, Silver spoon, Etc. etc., Urbanika, Pondering, Employment, etc. The types of postings vary from usual intros to reportages, personal diaries, editorials, profiles, cooking recipes, doctor’s advice, poems, etc. In two of the postings, authors are active even in the comments area and participate in the debate with readers, thus marking one of the few, yet very precious, cases of active author-reader interaction.

[blogu i Shqiptarja.com]



Pyet mjekun
AMISA MUKAJ

31 Tetor 2014 10:02

Kanceri i Gjirit & trashëgimia familjare

Kanceri është një sëmundje që krijohet nga shumë faktore si përsëhmbull menyra e jetesës, mjedisi ku jetojme, historia familjare, moshë e menstruacioneve të para dhe menopauzës, moshë e lindjes së parë, kohezgjatja e ushqyerjes së fëmijës me gjë etj.



Përtej Lajmit
ERJONA RUSI

12 Mars 2014 11:53

Fajin e kanë vetë gratë

Kam "luftuar" gjithmonë me prindërit e mi, që kur isha rreth 4-5 vjeç dhe dëgjova fshehurazi teksa im atë, (iu prehtë shpirti në paqe) i thoshte nënës së ai donte më shumë vëllanë se mua. Që nga ai moment i akuzoja vazhdimisht sa herë që situata dukej në favor të vëllait.



SFIDA E KANCERIT
BRUNILDA HAXHIU

7 Mars 2014 1:16

Marsi i veshur me blu...

Marsi është simboli i ardhjes së pranverës me lule shumë...
Marsi ku lulëzojnë festat e dashura për të gjithë si



E TË TJERA-E TË TJERA
ARBEN DUKA

7 Nëntor 2014 14:03

Opozita entuziazmohet sa herë këtu ndodhin krime!
(Sarkazëm-Jashtë radhe)

Print-screen of the blog of shqiptarja.com, November 6, 2014

Yet, eventhough it has been conceived as a multi-thematic blog, with very interesting postings, the blog has not succeeded in attracting any large number of comments, without attracting a large audience. The most commented posting does not attract more than 30 comments. This number is far from the number of comments on news stories in the website and, therefore, it may not be considered a success story in terms of audience size. The relatively low popularity of the blogosphere in Albania may have had an influence on this.

Besides the blog in its authentic form, Albanian news websites have tried to create even debate pages called Forums. Thus, in 2010, panorama.com.al had one such forum, but it has been defunct for a number of years. In the same year (2010), shekulli.com.al also had a separate rubric called "Your opinion," but it does not exist anymore either. Balkanweb.com too has a special space for blogging that it also labels as Forum. The forum does not exist since about 10

years on the website, but in recent years it is almost abandoned and unupdated, apparently also due to the very low level of interest it has spurred among audiences.

In present days, there is a debate going on with regard to the practice known as “*news blogging*.” Some authors, for instance Axel Bruns, consider comments that follow news articles a form of blogging. According to Bruns, “*news blogging* is the practice of commenting on a story through blogging – whether it is a commentary on an original report or a comment on stories reported in other resources” (Bruns, 2007:11). The debate has extended further by posing the question: Is there journalism in blogs? Or is the blog just a form of interpersonal communication? The known blogger and journalist J.D. Lasica considers *news blogging* a “common act of journalism.” “In a world of micro-content disseminated to narrow audiences, increasingly more and more bits of news we encounter every day, are being conveyed through personal media – mainly weblogs.”³⁷ – Lasica says.

If we were to consider the practice of commenting news as a form of blogging, we could say that this blogging is very much used in Albania and it exists and is practiced by all news websites. Meanwhile, the blog in its classic form, in a separate webpage is less used.

In spite of the options and diverse choices that exist for comments in the main websites in Albania, the fact that content is not moderated and the presence of unethical messages on this space of news websites remains a major problem. Of the six main websites monitored, five of them during 2014 did not have comments moderated at all or were moderated sporadically, thus resulting in

37. Cited in: Bruns, Axel, *The practise of news blogging*, At: Bruns, Axel & Jacobs, Joanne, *Uses of blogs*, Peter Lang Publishing, f. 12, New York, 2007

numerous unfiltered comments from an ethical point of view. Only top-channel.tv adheres to preserving ethics and every published comment is moderated. The fact that comments are not moderated has led to ethical problems such as hate speech, verbal violence, violation of privacy, personal attacks, insults and name calling, etc., featured almost daily in a considerable part of comments published in Albanian news websites.

The situation of allowing unethical comments and the lack of filtering becomes even more disturbing when taking into consideration the fact that the media under monitoring are the most visited sites of online news in Albania and, given that they have the largest audience, such negligence leads to the generation of very negative impact on the public. There is no justification for the regress encountered in some outlets, such as shekulli.com.al, panorama.com.al or balkanweb.com, which until 2-3 years ago were much more careful and applied a strong filtering policy toward ethical violations. Thus, in 2010, in the caes of unethical comments, shekulli.com.al only published the name of the commentator and in the area of the comment wrote: "Comment erased for ethical reasons." This outlet was among the very few in Albania that included an ombudsman on ethics in its newsroom, but for some years now, the post does not exist anymore in the company's staffing pattern.

4. The use of social media by Albanian media

There is no more doubt about the added role that social media have for the success of a professional media outlet. The Pew Research Center's report "State of the News Media 2014" stresses that the latest data of empirical research conducted in the USA indicate that about 50 percent of social media users "share" or repost stories, video-stories or photo-stories, while 46 percent of them discuss on social networks about the latest events or developments.³⁸ This tendency has introduced a new role of the social media vis-à-vis online news media. Researcher Frédéric Filloux, in his story *How Facebook and Google Now Dominate Media Distribution* points out that the sector of news media has become increasingly dependent upon the traffic that comes from Facebook and Google.³⁹

Visitors' traffic coming from social networks, otherwise known as "referral traffic" has seen considerable growth in online media in Albania as well. The webmaster of one of the most visited Albanian portals in Albania – top-channel.tv – Igli Gjelishti says that about 32% of visitors to the website come from social networks. During questionnaire interviews with 39 leading officials or representatives of online media organized by the Albanian Media Institute in 2014, interviewees were asked: "How much do social media impact the increase of visitors to your website?" The responses indicate that most of the leading officials of online media (22 of 39) think that social media help a lot to increase the audience of a news website. 16 of them say

38. <http://www.journalism.org/packages/state-of-the-news-media-2014/>

39. <http://www.mondaynote.com/2014/10/19/how-facebook-and-google-now-dominate-media-distribution/>

it influences “somewhat,” 1 says “little” and none (0) of them is skeptical about this role of the social media.

4.1. Presence of professional media outlets in social media

After some initial hesitation, during the last 5 years, Albanian professional media outlets have appreciated and have committed to increasing their presence on social media. To that end, they have created their institutional pages or *fan pages* on social networks and other social media in order to get closer to their audience and have more online communication channels. The main social media in which Albanian media outlets have opened their pages are Facebook, Twitter, Google +, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest. Among these, the most used by Albanian media and by social media users in Albania are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Below is a table that shows the presence of the leading Albanian media outlets on social media:

News media and their presence on social media, August 7, 2015

No	Online media	Social Media						
		Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Google +	LinkedIn	Instagram	Pinterest
1	top-channel.tv	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	balkanweb.com	√	√	√	√	-	-	-
3	shekulli.com.al	√	√	√	√	-	-	-
4	panorama.com.al	√	√	√	√	√	-	-
5	shqiptarja.com	√	√	√	-	√	-	-
6	albeu.com	√	√	√	√	√	-	-

Source: Monitoring conducted by the author of this research on August 7, 2015

Based on the monitoring conducted on the pages of these six media

outlets on social media, it results that their largest number of fans or followers is on Facebook. On Twitter, the number of followers is visibly lower than on Facebook, also because of the lower popularity of this network, which was noted above. The table below presents the number of fans (page likes) on Facebook and followers on Twitter for each of these media outlets:

Number of fans on Facebook or followers on Twitter until August 7, 2015

No	Online media	No. of Facebook fans	No. of Twitter followers
1	top-channel.tv	1 030 356	10 874
2	balkanweb.com	91 106	3 003
3	shekulli.com.al	192 872	1 650
4	panorama.com.al	174 860	1953
5	shqiptarja.com	198 604	11 672
6	albeu.com	220 572	3 857

Source: Respective pages of the above media outlets on Facebook and Twitter

One is struck by the lead by far of Top-Channel with regard to fans on Facebook. Within 6 months alone, from February 6, 2015, until August 7, 2015, the number of fans of this media outlet increased by 76 268 fans, or about 8 percent more. Meanwhile, also impressive is the growth on social media of shqiptarja.com, which was founded less than 4 years ago. This media outlet ranks third with regard to the number of fans on Facebook and first with regard to the number of followers on Twitter. The growth of albeu.com, an online media outlet that was born on the web, is also considerable.

The above table reflects also the trend of preferences of social media users who, as seen above, are in a young age in their overwhelming

majority. Thus, we notice a lower number of fans for the websites of traditional media outlets, such as the pages of newspapers Shekulli and Panorama. The figures also reflect the preferences of social network users for video vis-à-vis text, which is also seen in the large number of fans of top-channel.tv, whose content for the most part is video.

Five of the six above outlets opened their pages also on the *video-sharing* platform YouTube. Shqiptarja.com does not have a page of its own but it has a link that leads you to the YouTube channel of television station A1 Report, owned by the same company. On the page of balkanweb.com too, most of the video content comes from television station News 24, which has the same owner. The newspaper Panorama online brings an interesting experience. In its YouTube channel, Panorama online has published numerous videos that are original products of its own staff. One also notices the relatively large number of viewers of videos on Albeu.

Yet, it was Top-Channel TV's YouTube channel that saw record growth in the number of video viewers. Within a period of 6 months, from February 7, 2015, until August 7, 2015, the number of video viewers increased by 90 percent. Thus, from 47 935 383 that it was on February 7, 2015, it reached 91 844 570 on August 7, 2015. The new design of the website concluded in the summer of 2014 must have had an impact on this growth as video content on the website was better organized and was separated from content having to do with the latest news stories. The "share" campaign through Facebook also had its own role on this increase.

Below are data having to do with the number of subscribers and the number of views of videos that each of the media outlets had on YouTube until August 7, 2015:

Number of subscribers and number of views of videos on YouTube, August 7, 2015

No.	Online media	Numumber of subscribers	Number of views of videos
1	top-channel.tv	132 383	91 844 570
2	balkanweb.com	2 083	6 238 185
3	shekulli.com.al	-	1 091 060
4	panorama.com.al	357	1 193 862
5	albeu.com	533	1 877 250

Source: Respective pages of the above media on the YouTube

From a general assessment, we may say that with the exception of Top-Channel, other Albanian media outlets have not yet exploited the video-sharing capacities on YouTube and generally on the Internet to the extent they should. Their original video content is scarce and in many cases, they republish video taken from the Internet or other websites, leading often also to violations of copyright rules.

Professional media outlets have created their own pages also on other social media such as Google +, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, etc., but given that these social media are little spread in Albania the number of followers of these media outlets on these sites is also very small. There is some growth in the last two years of Instagram, specializing mainly in video and photo sharing through mobile telephony equipment. Given that the Internet has seen a real boom on mobile equipment in Albania in recent years, the Instagram application has followed that trend. The page of Top-Channel on Instagram, until August 7, 2015, had 29 600 followers and a number of posts of 2 718, thus marking an increase in the use of Instagram by media outlets.

4.2. Social media as channels for the dissemination of information from professional media outlets

Besides the opening of pages or profiles of social media, another practice that online media outlets are pursuing is the involvement of users in the dissemination of online content. In this regard, there is extensive use of the “share” or reposting practices. All six monitored media outlets feature next to every published material (whether text, video, photo, etc.) the option for users to share, publish or republish a piece of material on different social networks. While in the case of institutional pages or *fun pages* it is mainly the media outlets themselves that disseminate their content on social media, in the case of “share” options, it is the users that carry out this dissemination.



The main channels for sharing content most used by Albanian media outlets online are Facebook, Twitter and Google +. In the case of top-channel.tv, readers are given the option to use 294 other online channels besides social media for sharing an article, video or photo. Understandably, a good part of these channels or social media are almost unknown in Albania, but nevertheless, they are possible to exploit even the few shares that may take place through these channels. The figure above shows the top-channel application for “sharing,” with all of these options.

In most cases, next to the options for “sharing,” one may see the number of “shares” for a story or material on each of the social media, as may be noticed in the figure above. This measurement is done automatically through the website and gives the newsroom the possibility to see which stories or materials have most shares through social media, thus reaching conclusions about the preferences of online users and about the social media that users most use. Such data also help in the process of *agenda setting* of a given media outlet.

Another channel for sharing content with others is the one enabled through e-mail. The form applied by balkanweb called “send to a friend” enables “sharing” with friends for stories, material or links through e-mail. Until the years 2009-2010, this interactive option was more frequent on Albanian websites, but it is on the decline at present, also because e-mail is being used less in interpersonal communications, with social networks increasingly taking up its place.

4.3. Social media as a source of information

The increase of social media access has been accompanied by an increasing use of them by different societal actors, including actors of politics, business, marketing, media, etc. Numerous pieces of information from different fields of social activity are now published first on social media or re-disseminated through their channels. This has generated increased attention also by journalists for increasingly greater use of social media as a source of information.

In the course of the monitoring in the context of this research, we noticed that social media was used as a source mainly for the categories of political, cultural and technological news.

As at the global level, in Albania too, political actors did not take long to notice the capacities of online communication and its advantages for political communication. One of these advantages has to do with the possibility that every politician or political force has today to avoid the mediation of traditional media outlets to build his/her own channels of direct communication with voters, supporters or the broader public. The majority of influential politicians and almost all political forces in Albania have their pages or profiles on social media. The statuses or postings of politicians or political parties on these social media have outlined a new source of information for reporters.

Besides politicians, known personalities of the arts, sports, culture and social activism are present on social media and reporters regularly follow their postings. Considerable coverage is devoted also to different developments in the field of technology and new media.

Based on a monitoring conducted for a period of one month (July 7 – August 7) on the website of Top-Channel, it resulted that there

were 63 stories that mentioned Facebook and 52 other stories that mentioned Twitter. Of the 63 stories that mentioned Facebook, in 44 of them, Facebook is used directly as a source of information for reporters who cite statuses or postings by politicians, artists, or different society personalities and make news stories out of them. The rest are stories that mention different technological or social developments related to Facebook or affecting it. In the case of stories that mention Twitter, of 52 stories encountered, 34 of them used Twitter as a source of news or reference.

On the website of shkulli.com.al, the number of stories that mention Facebook for the period July 7 until August 7, 2015, is even larger, a total of 109, of which 81 refer to Facebook as a source of news or information. Many other online media outlets use this practice too at different rates.

This tendency has created the new phenomenon that researchers call “Facebookization of journalism.” In the theoretical debate, there are authors who legitimize the use of social networks as the source of news, but there are others who see this as a practice of lazy journalism, as an impoverishment of live sources of journalism and as a detachment of it from the field. If we look at the Albanian case, besides online statuses or postings in social media that are truly worthy as news in terms of the information they bring, there are also many cases when things of no public interest or not really newsworthy are cited.

Furthermore, in some cases, references from social media have produced untrue and unverified news, thus harming the credibility and integrity of the very media outlet that publishes them or refers to them. A typical case is the publication of statements of some known soccer players, such as Ronaldo, Ibrahimovic, Beckham, etc., after the Albania-Serbia soccer match in October 2014, which later were

proven to be fake and taken without any verification from social media. Another case of recent times is the publication of a story that said that according to an American newspaper, the Albanian PM was the tallest PM in the world. The story, which first emerged on social media, was then published by most of the professional media outlets, without any fact checking. It was later learned that the information was fake and had originated from social media. Such examples speak of inadequate evaluation by media professionals of problems having to do with the credibility of information published on social networks.

Executive summary

Social media is assuming an increasingly greater role in the process of informing the public in Albania, besides professional media. For the traditional media, these are becoming new channels of connecting to audiences and of disseminating content. Yet, social media also appear as an important channel for disseminating content produced by users and the broader public.

The speed and pace of development of the social media in Albania has been closely linked with the pace and speed of the development of the Internet technology and the evolution of the country's economic and social-cultural context. In the process of Internet penetration in Albania, one notices two clear phases: Phase one begins with the country's first evern connection to the Internet in 1993 and continues until 2007. The second phase begins with 2007 and continues to date. During the first phase, there was a very limited spread of the Internet, which is linked also with the limited spread of information and communication technology in the country.

The turning point for the spread of the Internet was the privatization of the sole state-owned operator of telecommunications AlbTelekom in 2007, which generated immediate investments and a different vision for the development of the Internet and the telecommunications industry in general. Some stimulating government policies also contributed to this turning point.

Public information mass media in Albania began to discover the Internet, with its benefits and risks, somewhere in the middle of the 1990s. Massive contact with social networks in Albania began after 2007 and they were of such intensity that they enabled two of the largest networks in the world, Facebook and Twitter, to be

come popular very fast. Among social media, those that have seen the greatest development and have played an important role also for professional media in Albania are social networks, content exchange platforms and the blogosphere.

At present, Facebook holds the lion's share in the market and space of social networks in Albania. Statistics speak of a number of users that is several times higher than the number of the second most popular network in the country, Twitter. The penetration rate of Facebook in January 2015 reached about 45% of the population. The number of Facebook users reached about 1 340 000. Of these, about 860 000 were males and 480 000 were females.

After Facebook, YouTube is the second most used medium in Albania. Albanian content on YouTube is dominated by content created and disseminated by professional media, such as the television stations Top Channel and Klan. Meanwhile, the Albanian YouTube channels, beside professional media, also include videos published by thousands of citizens who have become part of civic media production or participatory journalism. A problem has emerged with the citizens' publication or republication online of video material that is protected by copyright.

The Albanian blogosphere features the application of two practices: 1. Creation of independent blogs, which are not part of any other website or portal; 2. Creation of blogs or forums within different news portals or websites.

Independent blogs have been created mainly by journalists or analysts who use the blog to publish their comments or analyses as well as those of blog collaborators, as well as to have a window for direct connection with their fans or readers. These blogs often feature comments or stories that are refused by newspaper or other traditional media newsrooms due to their editorial policies, thus

granting some kind of expansion to freedom of expression.

After an initial hesitation, during the last 5 years, Albanian professional media have appreciated and have engaged to increase their presence on social media. To that end, they have created their own institutional pages or *fan pages* on social networks and other social media in order to be closer to their audiences and to have more online communication channels with them. The main social media on which Albanian media outlets have opened their pages are Facebook, Twitter, Google +, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest. Among these, the most used by Albanian media and by social media users in Albania are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Aside from the opening of pages or profiles on social media, another practice that online media is using is the involvement of users in spreading online content. In this regard, the practices of “sharing” and reposting have seen extensive use.

The increase of access of social media has been accompanied by an increasing use of them by different society actors, including politics, business, marketing, media, etc. Numerous pieces of information from different fields of social activity are initially published on social media or re-disseminated through their channels. This has generated increased attention of reporters and their increased use of social media as a source of information.

During the monitoring conducted in the context of this research, we noticed that social media were used as a source mainly for the categories of political news, cultural news and technology and new media fields.

A search conducted over a one-month period (July 7 – August 7, 2015) indicates that Facebook and Twitter are used directly as sources of information by reporters, who cite statuses or postings by

politicians, artists or different society figures and make news stories out of them. Most online media share this practice in Albania.

The use of Facebook as a source of information for reporters has created the new phenomenon that researchers have called “Facebookization of journalism.” In the theoretical debate, there are authors who legitimize the use of social media as a news source, but there are others who see this as a practice of lazy journalism, as an impoverishment of live sources of journalism and as its detachment from the field. If we look at the Albanian case, besides online statuses or postings on social media that are truly newsworthy in terms of the information they bring, there are also many cases when quotes have no public interest or any newsworthy weight. Furthermore, in some cases, references from social media have produced untrue and unverified stories, thus harming the credibility and integrity of the very media outlet that published or referred to them.

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