Media Literacy and Education needs of journalists and the public in Albania

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Executive Overview

Media literacy has not yet become part of the public debate. An accurate term for the concept has not been yet translated into Albanian language.

Thanks to the overall debate on media professionalism, especially ethics, there is a degree of reflection and discussion on media quality. The media professionals and academicians interviewed shared that the public has some knowledge and critical sense on media in Albania, but media literacy education would be very helpful in improving understanding of how media works and how the public should read it. “Citizens are aware that news, attitude and context that the media convey are biased, but it is also clear that the further the citizens are from the elites and the capital, the more difficult it is for them to understand why media is the way it is,” sais Blendi Salaj from Media Aktive.

The emergence of the new and social media is another driver for the introduction of media education in the curricula. “Part of the population, based on experience or intuition can make the difference between the reality constructed by media and the real life. However, this should not be left to chance and media education should be part of the curricula. This is even more urgent with the development of new media and Internet penetration, which has further complicated reading and understanding the massive messaging, in fact we should go from ‘media literacy’ to ‘communication literacy’,“ says Rrapo Zguri, Professor of journalism at the University of Tirana.

Apart from some initiatives of the civil society and the NGO sector there is no particular development or attempts to promote the concept of media literacy through events or to assess the needs and media literacy levels with studies and evaluations.

Media Landscape

Albanian media landscape is especially rich in numbers given the small population and market: it has over 20 daily newspapers, 71 radio stations, 70 television stations, 109 cable televisions, and three commercial multiplexes\(^1\). In addition, access to internet and use of mobile phones has steadily increased, enabling greater access to media content. According to official data, there were 3.4 million active mobile phone users in Albania in 2015, compared to the population of around three million, taking the penetration rate in terms of active users to 120%\(^2\). Out of these, 1.5 million were estimated to access broadband services from their

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1 AMA List of Audiovisual Media: [www.ama.gov.al](http://www.ama.gov.al)
mobile, marking an increase of 43% from 2014\textsuperscript{3}. Overall internet penetration rate is estimated to be at 60% of the population.\textsuperscript{4}

While media has become an important player on the Albanian scene, there is arguable little knowledge on the way it works, its credibility and the factors that make it influential. General perception is that media scores well in terms of public trust, especially when compared judiciary system and policy decision-makers, who are considered more corrupt or have more negative image.

One of the few studies on media use reveals that television is the most trusted media, with 73% of surveyed saying they trust TV the most\textsuperscript{5}. Radio, press, and online media fell into the credibility range from 43% to 46%. Albanians spend on average 2 hours and 40 minutes per day watching TV\textsuperscript{6}. Time spent online is significantly rising as most of it is spent on social media (Facebook / Youtube, etc.). It is unknown how much time is spent for searching information\textsuperscript{7}.

**Government Policy on Media Literacy**

The law that sets the framework on pre-university education in Albania is Law No.69/2012 “On Pre-university education in the Republic of Albania.” The law does not mention media literacy as a notion or regulates instructions on it in any form, says Bardhyl Musai, education expert. The law does include in the list of fundamental competencies that students in pre-university level must acquire also “digital competencies,”\textsuperscript{8}. Along the same lines, the curricula approved in 2014 was also approved having in mind the competency-based approach\textsuperscript{9}.

The law on pre-university education, bylaws, and strategies do not specify media literacy as part of the education process in elementary, basic, or secondary school. “This is something that should be changed, since in the 21st century, children are exposed to media coverage all the time and they should be able to have a critical view on what they see, hear, or read,” says Erida Koleci, expert of curricula on Albanian language and literature for pre-university education, Institute of Development of Education.

Parts of certain subjects do touch on media literacy concepts, although there is no separate subject of media literacy, neither in optional subjects, nor in the main curricula. In the subjects of Albanian language, foreign language, and civics, there are hours in the teaching plan that are devoted to elements related to media literacy. “There are topics like analyzing a media text, creating an advertisement, dissecting the parts of a media article, how to use images and their

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Internet World Stats: [http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm)
\textsuperscript{5} Fondacioni Soros, Sondazh kombëtar për percepimet dhe pritshmëritë për anëtarësimin e mundshëm të Shqipërisë në BE, 2014.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Law no.69/2012, Art. 13.
\textsuperscript{9} Strategy for Pre-University Education, 2014-2020.
symbols.”\textsuperscript{10} The basic skills that can be considered as part of the media literacy are in the lower classes, whereas from the ninth grade till the twelfth there are topics and subjects that aim to work more on building the capacities to carry out a critical analysis of the media, like analyzing a media text and judging on the information or opinion offered and its effects\textsuperscript{11}. So, overall media literacy is not mentioned in any way in the curricula, but some of its components have been introduced across several subjects, in a graduated form.\textsuperscript{12}

Another subject related to media literacy taught through classes 3-12 in pre-university education is Information and Communications Technology (ICT). ICT subject is related mainly to basic technical skills of using computer and creating media content, not on the quality of the content, developing skills like how to develop a website, how to work with images and graphs, etc.\textsuperscript{13}

Given the novelty of media literacy as a concept introduced through a few topics in the curricula, training of teachers on the topic is lacking and it seems that they are having difficulty understanding, updating or explaining knowledge related to this topic\textsuperscript{14}. This is even more valid for the ICT, which is a subject of the curricula. “Often this subject is taught by teachers who have had short-term training and are educated in other fields, such as physics, mathematics, and this is a way of fulfilling the number of classes a teacher must have. Training of teachers is certainly lagging much behind or is inexistent, both in ICT and in media literacy.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Media Education}

Albania’s experience in the field of university journalism education is a relatively recent one. The first school was the one established within the Department of Political-Judicial sciences, fashioned after the Soviet model. This school lasted for ten years, until the early 70s, and it later was succeeded by different kinds of courses, taught by the same teachers.

The new school, part of the Department of History and Philology, was started in 1992. Its establishment was viewed as a necessity due to the increase in the number of newspapers of different orientations and their usage of a great many number of new journalists. Until 2010, it was estimated that a total of 1,116 students had graduated from this department, however, it is difficult to track and to estimate how many of these students that graduated journalism have worked in the media\textsuperscript{16}. Statistics show that the number of students that were enrolled in the first decade of the school is almost the half of those that enrolled in the second decade\textsuperscript{17}. This significant increase in number of enrolled students can be explained by two factors: increasing

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{10} Ibid.
\bibitem{11} Ibid.
\bibitem{12} Ibid.
\bibitem{13} Ibid.
\bibitem{14} Ibid.
\bibitem{15} Ibid.
\bibitem{16} Albanian Media Institute, “Journalism Education in Albania,” 2010.
\bibitem{17} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
interest on receiving a journalism degree and education and entering the profession, as well as reformation and better reputation of the faculty of journalism.

Currently, only the public university offers bachelor journalism studies in its branches in Tirana, Elbasan, and Shkodra. The student’s quota are fixed according to the capacities of the university – in Tirana one, in the year 2015-2016 the government-fixed quota was 85 students for the bachelor degree, while for the University of Shkodra and that of Elbasan the quotas were 60 and 55, respectively. These figures are generally stable - in 2014, 60 students graduated with a bachelor’s degree in journalism in Tirana and 50 for the universities in Shkodra and Elbasan, each.

The University of Tirana Department of Journalism also offers master’s and Ph.D. degrees in journalism and communication. In the last years a total of 202 students have received a master’s degree out of the 400 students registered.

Other private universities also have offered journalism degrees for a few years; however, such programs have either been closed, or have been turned into communication and public relations programs, rather than strictly journalism ones. The only private university which has journalism program is Beder University, which offers a Bachelor’s degree in communication and a Master’s Degree which can be focused either on Communication or on Journalism.

The journalism department at the public university has undergone significant change in the curricula. From the classical 4-year degree, it has adopted the two-tier system, in accordance with the Bologna process. The bachelor degree offers three profiles of journalism where students can choose from: social/culture journalism, political journalism, and economic journalism.

The second level degrees also offer opportunities to become more specialized in the profile of journalism desired. The profiles offered are Public relations, Media marketing, Media management, European and international journalism, and Intercultural communication.

It is evident that there has been significant reform in the curriculum and department of journalism at the public university ever since its establishment. As Rrapo Zguri, professor of journalism, University of Tirana, said for this report, one of the department’s strength is that “it has managed to establish a faculty made of professors that cover a broad spectrum of profiles in journalism education.” However, it is clear that as with every area of education in the country, this branch also has further needs to reform and improve and the process will be ongoing.

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20 University of Tirana, Department of Journalism, October 2014: The figures for graduates in journalism in recent years are the following: 63 in 2011, 65 in 2012, 66 in 2013, and 55 in 2014.
21 Peace Institute, „Media Integrity Matters,” Albania, 2014.
22 Department of Journalism Teaching Plan 2013-2016.
When it comes to teachers’ background, they are diverse. For example, looking at the roster of the faculty of the department and their degrees, not even half of them has had a bachelor’s degree in journalism. This is also due to the fact that formal education in journalism in the country resumed only after the 90s. Most of the primary degrees of the faculty are in political sciences, Albanian language and literature, and philosophy, while degrees in fine arts are also present. Nonetheless, it should also be said that the faculty members have continued obtaining their master’s degrees or Ph. D.s in journalism or communication. At the same time, it is difficult to find someone who still practices journalism at the University of Tirana department, and only some of them have been practitioners in the past. In general, their background is related to journalism and especially communication, but they have not necessarily practiced the profession.

Professional Development and Specialisation

There is no structured data or track record on the number of students that graduated journalism being following a carrier in journalism. Neither universities, nor other bodies collect data on the rate of journalism graduates' employment in the media, although there is reason to believe that “a considerable portion of the young journalists entering the field in Albania are graduates of these programs.”23 A 2014 survey showed that 64% of polled journalists had a bachelor’s degree, while 32% had a postgraduate degree, and another 1.7% had completed a doctorate degree.24

The general opinion is that holding a degree in journalism has become essential towards working as a journalist at the current stage.25 According to the above-mentioned survey, 27% of polled media employees from a representative sample declared they had graduated in fields other than journalism, compared to 73% that said they had studied journalism, communication, or both.26 In addition, the survey sheds more light on the relation between education in journalism and the newsroom hierarchy: 12% of polled people at leading positions in the newsroom have majored in journalism, vis-à-vis 39% of reporters and 15% of editors.27 The division is even more dramatic in advanced degrees in journalism: only 6% of managing directors in the media have an advanced journalism degree, while three times more reporters seem to have a master’s degree in journalism.28

While figures indicate that the importance of majoring in journalism to follow a career in the media industry has increased, in practice this does not seem to be essential. Most journalists and editors point out that the hiring process is not necessarily merit-based. Only a few media outlets advertise their vacancies, but there is no further transparency on what are the selection

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
procedure and criteria applied\textsuperscript{29}. In addition, data shows that professional qualifications do not necessarily provide a good reason for advancing one’s career in journalism. A recent report showed that there is no direct relation between one’s education and the position in the newsroom: most editors interviewed for the report did not study journalism, but ended up in this career mainly due to passion\textsuperscript{30}.

At the same time, there are no accurate statistics on number of journalists and even less so on number of open jobs on the media market. The Union of Albanian Journalists estimates that at the end of 2014 there were about 5,527 employees in the media sector, and about half were people involved in producing editorial content, namely journalists and editors, said Aleksander Cipa, Chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists. Similarly as there is no information on the availability of jobs in the market, there is also no study or indication on the needed skills to be part of this market for students of journalism. Students of journalism that worked in newsroom while they also studied for their degree were a common phenomenon until a few years ago. This seems to no longer be the case, perhaps both due to the financial crisis in the media, but also due to lack of interest in working in the media outlets, especially as simple reporters. There is also a visible dissatisfaction of media editors with the skills gained by journalism students and their applicability on the job. In fact, media editors have continuously pointed out that formal education should shift towards greater practice, rather than prevailing of theoretical concepts\textsuperscript{31}. “I believe that the university provides a good theoretical education and you can feel the positive influence of some professors in certain subjects. However, students have very few practical skills to respond to current media needs. For example, student formats as YouTube videos or as podcasts in SoundCloud are missing, and media literacy is not only understanding how media should work, but also the ability to produce media in an era when the spectator can become a protagonist,” said one of the interviewees, Blendi Salaj from Media Aktive. The opinion is that formal education should change and adapt to the changing times: “Media is changing rapidly and the first challenge of university has been preparing students for the market. Now that the environment has changed with the new media emergence and against the background of financial crisis, the challenge of the university is bringing up the universal journalist, who can cover both new media and traditional one,” says the media expert, Lutfi Dervishi.

In this context, the cooperation between universities and the media outlets is not particularly visible. Students of journalism that also work in the media is not news, but this is more on an individual basis, rather than based on mutual agreements between media and university. “Although I would say that there is a certain cooperation, it certainly needs to improve. It should become institutional, in the form of contracts and agreements for internships for students between the Department and the main media outlets in the country, since both sides are interested in the cooperation,” says Rrapo Zguri, professor of journalism, University of Tirana.

\textsuperscript{29} Interviews with journalists from mainstream daily newspapers and TV stations.
\textsuperscript{30} SEEMO/ Peace Institute, “Editors in Albania,” 2016.
\textsuperscript{31} Interviews with editors.
Earlier this year the Department of Journalism signed an agreement with the regulatory authority, Audiovisual Media Authority, which in theory would enable the facilitation of internships of students at the audiovisual media outlets in the country, but its effects remain to be seen.

The media outlets generally are not interested in or cannot afford advancing the professional skills of their journalists through training sessions, professional conferences, internships, or other forms. Most journalists that participates in training sessions organized by NGOs find it difficult to follow training courses, as they are not released for their day-to-day responsibilities, while the training courses are totally optional, says Agim Doksani, project coordinator, Albanian Media Institute.

Moreover, although training and professional development opportunities might be available for journalists, the knowledge gained cannot always be implemented in the reality of the Albanian newsrooms, due to prevailing “guided” or commercial interests over public interest. “We have a situation where students at the university or in professional training courses learn on the mission and principles of journalism, but when they start working or go back to work in Albanian media, they see that these principles are not respected and not followed, and are totally worthless,” said Rrapo Zguri, Professor of journalism at the University of Tirana.

Journalism Quality and Standards

There are numerous journalists’ associations in the country, either general ones, or based on regional grounds or specialty, such as economy, health, etc., however, hardly any of them is active at the moment, or they are active only sporadically. “Journalists have always found it difficult to organize themselves, both in terms of protecting and advancing their rights and in uniting in the name of professional goals and identity.”

The two oldest organizations are the League of Albanian Journalists and the Association of Professional Journalists, established in the early 1990s. Even though there are also many other associations, cooperation, professional solidarity and uniting for advancing the profession there have not been sufficient incentives and motivation so that any of these associations would become a strong professional organization.

Given the weak professional organization of journalists and in spite of several attempts, a successful self-regulation initiative has yet to make its entry. There is a Code of Ethics, which was first drafted in 1996 by the Albanian Media Institute in cooperation with the major journalists associations at the time. Although generally accepted, there has never been a formal endorsement and commitment from the media outlets to the Code. In 2006 the Code was revised again by the Albanian Media Institute, in a discussion with media representatives and there were renewed efforts to establish a self-regulatory body, but the media again failed to unite for this purpose.

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32 SEEMO/Peace Institute, “Media Integrity Matters,”Albania report.
“Apart from these attempts to organize self-regulation on a national or broad scale, the media outlets have also failed to adopt of their own accord formal guidelines on their conduct.”  

However, there have been a few exceptions through the years. Daily newspaper Shekulli had its code of ethics in 1998, as well as an Ethics Bureau, an initiative of the owner, rather than of the newsroom, an initiative that was short-lived.  

Another group that has adopted a code of ethics is also Free and Fair Media Group, but there has been no public case or debate to show how well this code works.

In July 2015 a group of journalists established the Council of Media, which was aimed to work mainly towards ethical initiatives in the profession, however, major achievements cannot be reported to-date.

Civil Society/NGO Sector Role

Since media literacy is not a subject introduced in the curricula, there are no associations dealing particularly with media literacy, such as those of teachers, librarians, or professional learning centres. In the same way, the weak status of journalists’ association does not allow for any influence on education policy.

Albanian Media Institute (ANI) is the main NGO in the country engaged in training of journalists, working in this field since 1996. It regularly implements mainly short-term programs in journalism training for both students of journalism and mid-career journalists. In recent years its activities have particularly focused on training journalists and students in digital skills, with the aim of improving abilities of journalists to use different forms of expression, adapting to the new developments in the profession.

Apart from training in digital literacy for journalists, AMI has also attempted to pave the way for introducing media literacy in the pre-university curricula.

Other organizations have also tackled the media literacy issue, although initiatives have been sporadic. One of the main supporters of such initiatives has been Open Society Foundation Albania, which has supported AMI and other organizations in this field.

Media Aktive Center implemented another major project in the period 2013-2105 – “Intensive Practice of Multimedia Journalism”. Under the project 90 students from journalism and other department came together, realizing start-ups of citizen journalism in the shape of blogs, YouTube channels and a WebRadio, and produced media content under supervision of media professionals, explains Brunilda Bakshevani, Project Coordinator, OSFA Albania. “Through these courses we have enabled the young people to become familiar with the nature of the job that takes place in a radio and television and have urged them to use digital tools for quality and influential products in society”.

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33 SEEMO/Peace Institute, “Media Integrity Matters,” Albania report.
Another project related to multimedia production by citizens is the RRATHE project, organized in three phases between 2011 and 2015 - a competition for young people to produce video-documentaries on relevant social problems. The program has led to the creation of 68 video-documentaries, which have been broadcast by the national television, said Brunilda Bakshevani, Project Coordinator, OSFA Albania.

Other smaller scale programs supported by OSFA in this field have been a series of training and talks with high school students in Gjirokastra on media literacy as well as training young Roma people to produce journalism content in multimedia form, in order to advance the needs of their community.\(^3^5\)

OSCE Presence in Albania has also organized a summer school on media literacy, bringing together thirty-five high school students, aiming to extend their knowledge on what media is, its role and contribution to a democratic society, by also teaching them basic reporting skills, explained Elira Canga, Media Development Unit, OSCE Presence in Albania.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.
List of Interviewees

ALBANIA

Bardhyl Musai, education expert, July 28, 2016
Rrapo Zguri, professor of journalism, University of Tirana, July 25, 2016
Aleksander Cipa, Chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists, 14 April 2016
Blendi Salaj, Media Aktive, July 6, 2016
Lutfi Dervishi, media expert, July 13, 2016
Agim Doksani, project coordinator, Albanian Media Institute, June 18, 2016
Brunilda Bakshevani, project coordinator, OSFA Albania, June 5, 2016
Elira Canga, Media Development Unit, OSCE Presence in Albania, June 28, 2016