



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

MEDIA POLARIZATION AND MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA

Ilda Londo

ALBANIA

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

Info: <https://seenpm.org/>

Contact: admin@seenpm.org

MEDIA POLARIZATION AND MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA

ALBANIA

Author: Ilda Londo

Editor, regional lead researcher: Brankica Petković

Language editor: Fiona Thompson

Design: Špela Kranjec for Filip Kranjec s.p., Ljubljana, Slovenia

Publishers: SEENPM, Tirana, Peace Institute, Ljubljana and Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

Ljubljana, June 2021

© SEENPM, Peace Institute, Albanian Media Institute and the author



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media



This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union.
Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and the publishers
and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 4

2. MEDIA TRUST – OPINION POLL AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS 5

2.1. Media use	5
2.1. Media trust	6
2.3. Attitudes and experience with the media	12
2.3.1. Journalists and editors on hate and propaganda models of media and communication trends	14
2.3.2. Journalists and editors on hate narratives against journalists and media trust	16
2.3.3. Gender-media issues	18

3. CONCLUSION 20

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS 21

Literature and sources	22
About the author	23



MEDIA POLARIZATION AND MEDIA (DIS)TRUST IN ALBANIA

Ilda Londo

1. INTRODUCTION

The media scene in Albania is vibrant, but complex. The situation with professionalism and ethics is often described negatively, pointing at a lack of independence, overdependence on politics, inability, violations of privacy, and other misdoings. These criticisms frequently pervade the public debate, usually neglecting to explain and analyze causes that lead to professional problems, such as economic issues, the situation in labour relations and investment in human resources, and undue interference from multiple actors. In recent years, public communication narratives in the country against the media have tended to intensify, leading to increased public criticism in this respect.

Previous research conducted in 2020 analyzed the models of spreading hate and disinformation on the one hand, and the hate narratives present in the media, on the other. While the media often are not the main sources of hate speech, they certainly can serve as a vehicle for it, especially in the comments sections of websites. In addition, attempts to misinform and spread propaganda are a constant trend in the Albanian media, a trend driven by different reasons and factors, including but not limited to low professionalism and poor self-regulation. The analysis of hate narratives in the media revealed that the greatest producers of hate narratives, division, disinformation, and polarization remain the political actors, partly because of their pervasive presence in the media and their use of social media. The lack of proper mechanisms to counter hate narratives in the media is another debilitating factor that facilitates the spread of these narratives.

The current research aims to provide a glimpse of the public perception of the media and the trust issues existing, as well as an explanation by media professionals and their own view on the relationship between the public and professionalism, against the background of hate narratives. Journalists were indicated as one of the groups that are often targeted by hate narratives in public communication. This research is an opportunity to see what the public really thinks of media conduct and also gather the feedback and reaction of journalists and editors on the matter, analyzing the roots of the problem of hate narratives and discussing ways to improve the situation. For this purpose, a poll was conducted by IPSOS Strategic Marketing during February 2021 with the public, and a focus group with media professionals followed in May 2021 to discuss the results of the poll and their own viewpoint on the

problems in the field. The following sections will provide an overview of the main poll results in terms of media use, media trust, and attitudes regarding media trust and hate narratives. In addition, the outcome of focus group discussion with journalists and editors will attempt to provide a broader picture and some recommendations on potential courses of action.

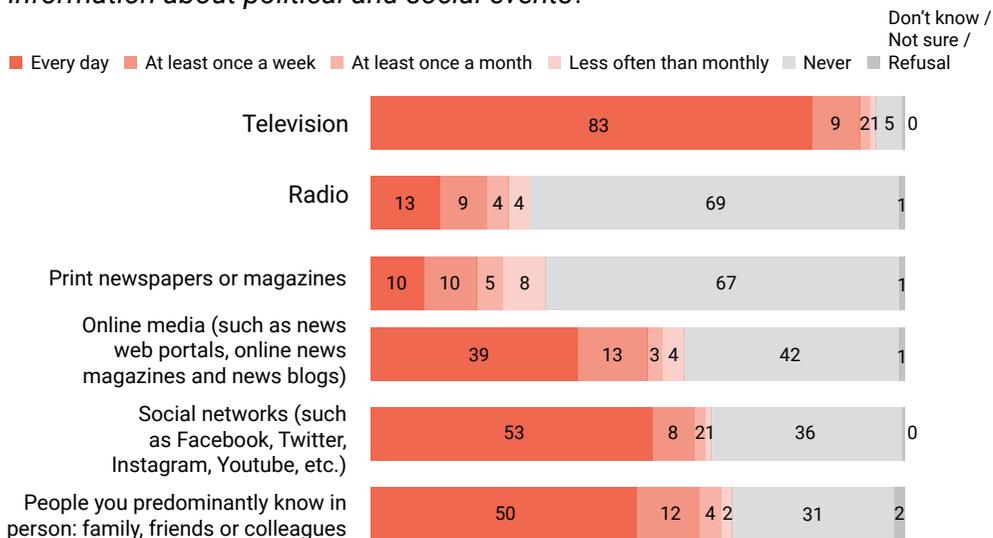
2. MEDIA TRUST – OPINION POLL AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

The opinion poll was conducted on February 2021 with a sample of 1010 adult respondents, through a mixed method (telephone and online). The poll questions were related to media consumption habits, the main tendencies regarding citizens’ trust in media, and also the attitude vis-a-vis hate narratives and the role of media and journalists in the spread of disinformation and hate speech. A focus group of six journalists and editors from various media outlets was convened on 12 May 2021 to discuss the findings of the poll and share their opinions and experiences in this regard. The following sections describe and analyze the reaction of both citizens and professionals in terms of media trust.

2.1. Media use

During the poll citizens were asked about their media consumption habits. Television stands out as the most commonly used source for gathering information in Albania, as more than four fifths of citizens claim to be using it on a daily basis (83%). Other traditional media, such as print newspapers/magazines and radio, are far behind, both followed daily by about one in ten citizens (10% and 13%, respectively).

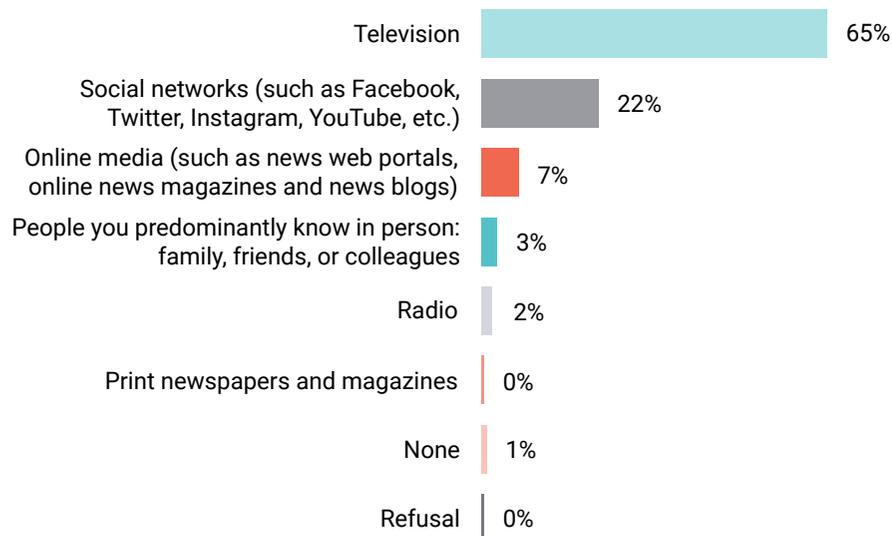
Graph 1. How often do you use the following sources to get news, i.e. information about political and social events?



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Social networks are the second most commonly consumed news source, through which more than half of the population aged over 18 is informed on a daily basis (53%). Similar numbers are present in the case of personal contacts such as family, friends and colleagues (50%), while news web portals, online news magazines and blogs are being used by two fifths of citizens every day (39%). This poll confirms that television continues to be the main authority in terms of frequency of information, even though social networks and online media have risen steadily compared to previous polls conducted a few years ago.

Graph 2. *What is your main source of information?*



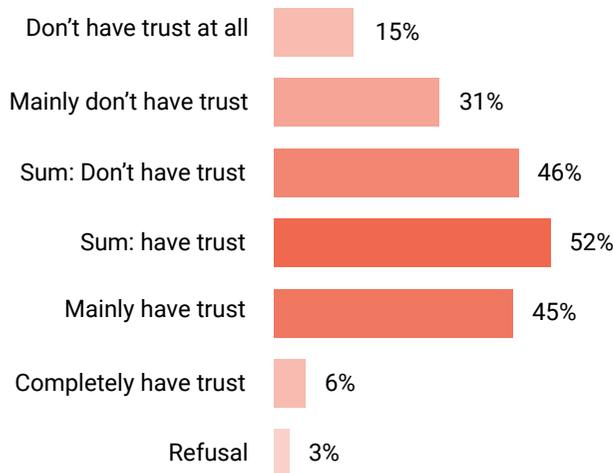
Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When asked about the main source of information, rather than the frequency, the trend remains similar: television prevails (65%), followed by social networks (22%), and the others to a lesser extent. Again, the importance of television both in terms of frequency of use and as a source of information is solid, indicating the great effect it should have on the audience. However, the poll showed a difference in age groups and information channels. Online sources such as social networks and web portals are more often main source of news for young people (18–29 years old), those with higher education and with the highest household income. On the other hand, television is far more often the primary source for citizens over the age of 45 and those with primary or no education.

2.1. Media trust

During the poll citizens were asked a series of questions in order to determine the level of public trust and identify problems in this aspect and factors that might affect lack of trust of citizens in the media. The poll also looked at trust across different types of media, the ranking of particular media according to reliability, reasons for distrust and trust, and the overall level of trust on public service media.

Graph 3. *In general, how much trust do you have in the media – such as newspapers, TV, radio or online news sources – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly in Albania?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

When looking at the level of public trust in the media, the respondents are clearly divided, although more of them tend to trust rather than distrust the media: 52% of the respondents said that they have trust versus 46% who did not have any. However, the breakdown of the level of trust and distrust reveals that 15% of citizens do not have any trust at all, versus 6% who completely trust the media, indicating that distrust tends to run deeper than trust.

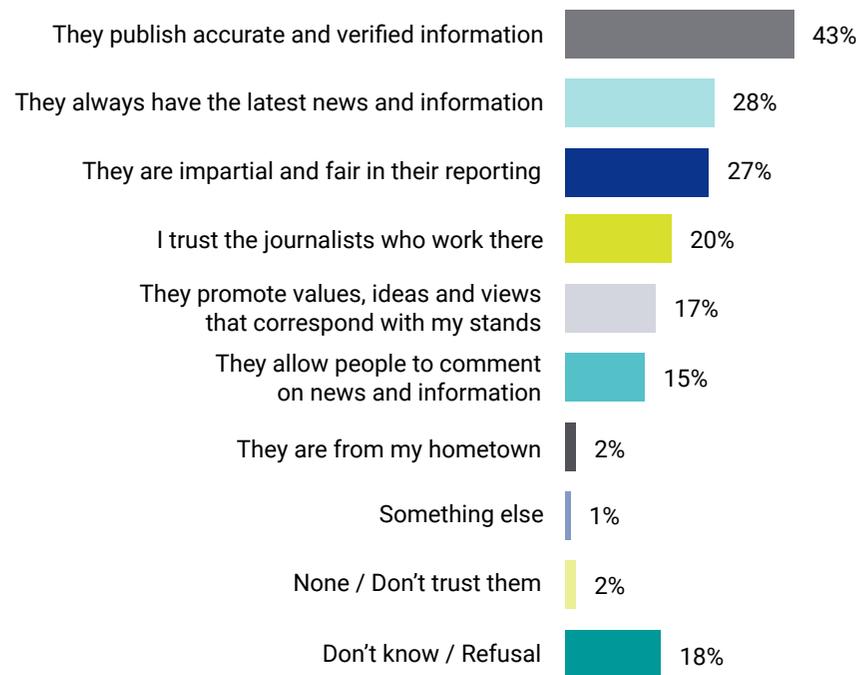
Graph 4. *To what extent do you trust each of the following media is a reliable source of news and information? - Mainly + Completely trust (Marks 3+4)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Asked specifically about what media type they find more reliable in terms of news and information, television is the most trusted type, with 60% of the respondents ranking it high. It was followed by international media outlets and investigative media. Even though the list of international media also included less trusted sources such as Sputnik and Russia Today, there was no difference made in this respect. Journalists and editors – participants in the focus group expressed surprise at the fact that immediately after these sources the public considered online media and social networks as more trusted, while radio and print newspapers were ranked the lowest. They said that even though all types of media have their own issues, reliability of information is certainly not a defining feature of online media and social networks, quite often the opposite is the case.

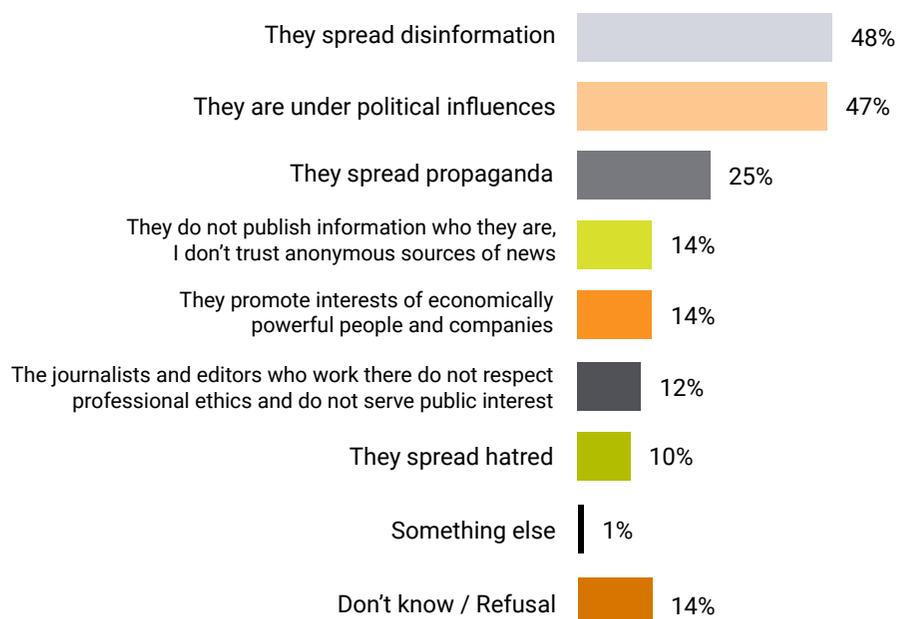
Graph 5. *You may trust some media outlets more than others. Thinking about the media you consider the most trustworthy, what are the main reasons you trust them? - All answers*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Asked to provide reasons for their trust in media by ranking the answers provided, 43% of them considered accurate and verified information as the main reason for trusting particular media outlets, while the second most ranked reason was the perception these media outlets had the latest news and information, immediately followed by impartial and fair reporting. It is important to note that a relatively large percentage, 18%, said they did not know or refused to answer, which might indicate that there might not always be a clear or solid opinion why certain media outlets are more trusted and what citizens really look for in media outlets and the information they provide.

Graph 6. *Thinking about the media outlets you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them? - All answers*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

On the other hand, when asked why they distrust media outlets, the public seemed to have a clearer idea. Almost half of them provided as their main reasons the spread of disinformation (48%) and the perception that media outlets are under political influence (47%), while another 25% said they spread propaganda, which is linked mainly to the political influence. Spread of hate, lack of ethics, lack of media transparency and promotion of economic interests were not so much a cause of concern as the first three. Here, again, 14% refused or did not know how to answer, which is a sizable part of the respondents that did not indicate reasons for distrusting the media.

The focus group (FG) participants did not find the results on media trust particularly surprising. They indicated as a very positive outcome the fact that 43% of respondents had stated that accuracy of news is what made them trust more, even though quick publication of news was ranked just behind it at 28%. “It is also very positive that at least 20% trust media outlets because they trust individual journalists and this increases public trust in the media, and makes us more confident in our own job,” said one of the FG participants.

At the same time, the focus group participants debated some of the findings, doubting whether there was a common understanding between citizens and journalists of certain terms and perceptions of the media reality in the country. For example, the poll indicated that 47% said they did not trust the media as it is under political influence, while economic influence as a reason for distrust was only 14%.

“This does not fit the reality we know; economic influence is as strong as the political one, and we know that often they come from the same source and are the same thing. This means that there is something wrong with the public perception of economic influence, and the general focus of the public remains on politics,” said FG participant 4.

Another contended point was the low perception of anonymous news sources as a problematic aspect that increases distrust in the media. The online media landscape suffers considerably in terms of transparency of its ownership and its newsroom staff, making anonymity the norm. In this respect, the focus group found the low importance given to this problem by the public as a perception that did not reflect the reality. “Only 14% say they do not trust the media because of anonymous sources. For years now, I have not been able to find the sources of news on news portals. I cannot find even the authors, they are totally anonymous, so this perception is not entirely correct I would say,” said FG participant 1.

In general, the media professionals – participants in the focus group indicated that they agree on the reasons and understand the public’s concerns when it comes to distrusting the media, mentioning other existing problems not identified in the poll.

“The main problems are not only disinformation and propaganda, but also the promotion of hate speech culture, the continuous presence on TV screens of people that quarrel or just should not be on TV at all. Corruption in the media is another element that we know exists. These are missing in the reasons for distrust, and are also part of the whole picture,” said FG participant 2.

When shown the trust of citizens in the poll on specific media outlets, the perception of the focus group participants is that the gap between the public’s perception of the media and the media community’s own perception regarding the range of existing problems has become stronger.

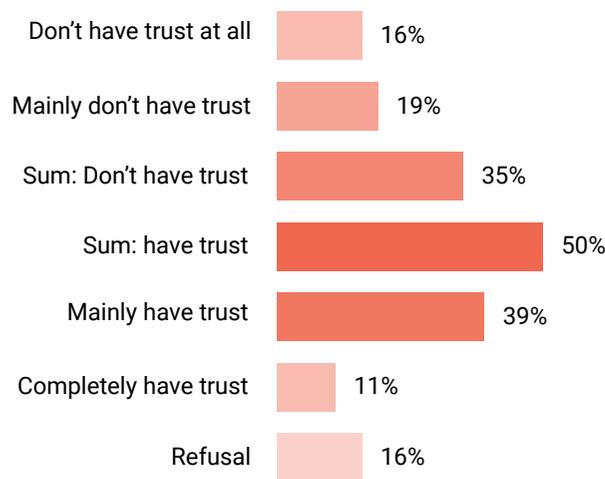
“We see at the top of trusted media outlets two TV stations that used to be diametrically opposed in terms of their editorial line a while ago and now they are the same. Here, we can also account for individual media bias or preference, but also that the public cannot always understand standards of editorial independence,” said FG participant 5.

Another focus group participant said:

“On the one hand, you indicate that the main preference for a trusted media outlet is providing accurate and verified information; on the other hand, we see that the most trusted media outlets are those that are clearly politically aligned. This leads us to believe that the public has problems understanding propaganda and distinguishing between independent news sources and propaganda.” (FG participant 4)

They also mentioned that the fact that foreign media, such as the BBC, or investigative media in the country are ranked as less trusted than Albanian media which the focus group participants considered has very little independence, indicates the problems the public have in distinguishing what makes media reports independent and trustworthy. The focus group participants were unanimous in highlighting the need for media literacy initiatives as a way to improve the ability of the citizens to be critical of media content.

Graph 7. *On a scale from 1 to 4, how much trust do you have in Public Service Media (RTSH - Albanian Radio Television), when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Finally, the poll also enquired as to the trust of citizens in the public media. Half of them said that they trusted the public broadcaster, whereas 35% did not have such trust. The percentage of people who were at the extreme end of the scale regarding trust was higher than for those ones who were sceptical: 16% did not have any trust at all, whereas 11% said they trusted the media completely.

Overall, the media professionals in the focus group indicated that this was a positive outcome for the public service media, but it needed to be explained and qualified. FG participant 1 said that more than an improvement in trust in public media, this could also reflect the deterioration of the quality of information in commercial media, which has degraded considerably. The focus group participants all generally agreed that the answers might reflect also the gradual changes in programming and in the quality of information, pointing out the generally neutral news content, and also increased targeting specific population groups in a more attentive manner.

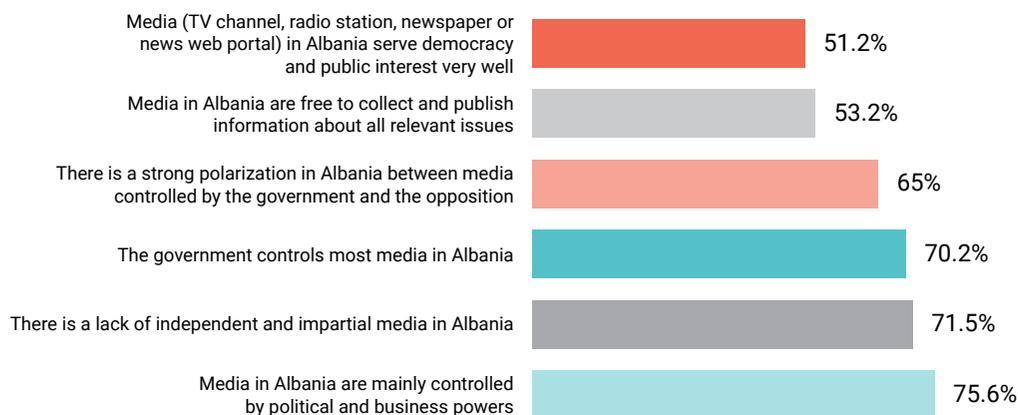
“During the last violent protests of the opposition, you could see that the anger of political militants was not directed at the cars of public broadcasters, but at those of public media, which reveals that the public perception of television as siding with one party or another is not as strong as it used to be, and it seems to have switched places with commercial media, in some respects,” said FG participant 1.

While there was strong agreement on the increased political neutrality of the public broadcaster, there was also an opinion that when asked to assess what they think of the television in general, the citizens have in mind all programmes, not just the quality of the news.

2.3. Attitudes and experience with the media

The final group of questions looked at the attitude of the public regarding the media, trying to probe public perception of the current status of media independence and the role of the media in society. The spreading of hate narratives and perceived media involvement in this respect was another issue addressed by the poll.

Graph 8. *On a scale of 1-4 how much do you agree with the following statements?*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The public largely believes that media independence is a huge problem in the media landscape. Between 70% and 75% of the respondents agreed that the government controls most media in the country, that there is a lack of independent media, and that the media is controlled mainly by political and economic centres of power. There was also a strong opinion that the polarization and division between media outlets supported by the opposition and those supported by the government is very real. On the other hand, about half of them also indicated that they believe that the media serves democracy and the public interest very well and that media outlets are free to receive and publish information on important topics, which is a perception that does not fit with the overwhelming opinion on the lack of media independence in the following statements.

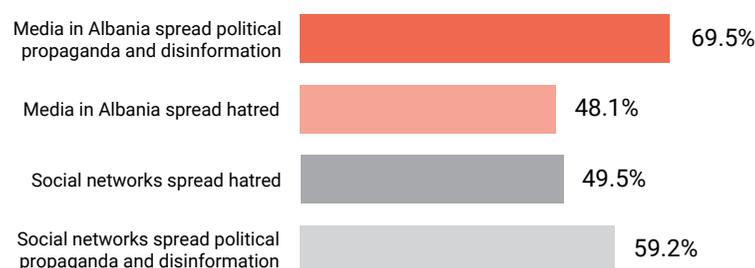
The focus group participants said that, in general, the perception reflected also their own reality. “They know that the media is influenced by politics, and 75% said so,” said FG participant 1. However, the discrepancy between the good role of the media and its satisfactory freedom and its weak independence in the other statements was also discussed in the focus group. “This is a paradox, because 50% say that media is free, and yet 75% indicate that there are many problems with its independence, meaning it is simultaneously an independent media and also a captured media; it is a confused perception,” said FG participant 3. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is the inherent media bias that individuals might have on the media outlets they follow, considering them free media outlets serving democracy, just because it fits with their own vision and opinion, even though they are far from independent.

Overall, the media professionals in the focus group identified the statements that describe media independence as controlled by economic and political centres of power, and the absence of independent media outlets as the stands that best describe their own perception and feeling of the current trends in the media landscape. They discussed the role of media outlets owned by NGOs as the only existing islands of editorial independence at the moment.

“Even though reports from these media outlets are often published in traditional media and other online media, the ability to reach the audience remains a problem. While you publish a report in several online media outlets, a mere news story on TV reaches more people and has greater impact,” said FG participant 3.

At the same time, FG participant 5 indicated that even the publication of these news stories in online media outlets is selective, as the media choose to publish what fits their own editorial stance.

Graph 9. On a scale of 1-4, to what extent do you agree with the statements:



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

Asked about the role of media and social networks on spreading propaganda and disinformation on the one hand, and hate speech, on the other hand, revealed results surprised the focus group. Some 69% of respondents indicated the media as the culprit in spreading propaganda and disinformation, compared to 59% who said that social networks are spreading these. When it came to spreading hatred, the social networks were only slightly higher than the media: 49.5% to 48.1%.

The focus group participants found this perception a wrong and exaggerated one, or indicated that the public has not understood the question or what they mean by hate.

“Apart from some TV shows that might contain hate speech, you cannot compare the media to the social networks when it comes to spreading hate speech. The media is in a bad shape, but it is much better than social networks in this respect. Social networks are the main sources of hate speech. We see all kinds of statuses of hate speech and comments on Facebook, by politicians, citizens, in all forms; in traditional media, it is not that often that this happens,” said FG participant 6.

The anonymity provided by social networks was also another factor mentioned that exacerbates the tendency to engage in hate speech. Finally, one of the focus group participants suggested that this might also be a self-defence mechanism of the respondents, which identifies the social networks with themselves, the people, while the journalists in the media are easier to be negative about.

2.3.1. Journalists and editors on hate and propaganda models of media and communication trends

The focus group participants considered the presence of hate and propaganda models in the media and communication as ubiquitous and rather problematic. They devoted a longer time to discussing propaganda in particular, which was considered to be prevalent compared to hate speech. The publication of articles that clearly originate from press offices is widespread, while direct broadcasting of political events from the government or opposition is also an everyday event in all news channels. Having all this space and time on media and often with minimum comment or filters from journalists leads to the massive presence of politics in the media.

All the media professionals in the focus group mentioned the fact that the Prime Minister has his own online television channel as a clear sign of the presence of propaganda, given that most media outlets directly broadcast what ERTV broadcasts.

“Propaganda is very much present in the media and in communication, as the politicians themselves have become media outlets in Albania. This means that there is no interest in fair reporting, representing

the other side, or fact-checking. Propaganda has reached disturbing dimensions, as we have come to accept that politicians are in fact media outlets,” said FG participant 1.

Another focus group participant also added that the hand of propaganda is visible everywhere in media coverage, saying that this is an increasingly frequent and disturbing phenomenon. “Our e-mail inboxes are full each day with communication from ministries and press offices. They bring ready-made news and even TV stories, with the completed editing, that should just be broadcast,” said FG participant 4.

Agreeing that the problem of propaganda is very concerning, what was highlighted as a more worrying problem is the inability of the media so far to react to the pressure of such a phenomenon.

“What is most worrying is not propaganda on its own, but the problem that we have agreed to become a conveyor belt for this propaganda. We have not established any mechanisms for how to face it, because sometimes we do not want to do it, do not know how to do it, and we are unable to resist it. We fail to do the minimum, indicating that certain content comes from a certain press office. We have become spokespersons of spokespersons, plus we are not telling the truth, which is the basic principle,” said FG participant 3.

According to all the focus group participants, the only way to come out of this extremely worrying trend is to return to the basics of the profession, no matter how difficult it seems. “At the moment, the propaganda and media have almost become one and the same, all boundaries have been erased. We must start from here, we should start putting boundaries and return to the basics,” said FG participant 3. However, the focus group participants highlighted that it is difficult to resist to pressure to publish propaganda connected both with political pressure and the workload in newsrooms that are already quite sparse.

“However, what we can do as journalists is to not just copy-paste the press releases or other ready-made material. We should also add some context, include official figures and statistics, mention previous statements from the same actor, etc. There are ways to counteract propaganda and resist it in some ways, it just needs more work,” said FG participant 4.

Discussing the trends on hate speech in the media and communication also produced a generally harmonious opinion among the participants in the focus group. They all accepted that hate speech was present in the media, but more so in online media and portals and social networks. The traditional media tries to maintain a more ethical level when it comes to generating such hate speech, although it is not exempt from republishing hate speech coming from different actors, especially politicians. The focus group participants also thought that most current affair debates tend to feature heated discussion,

often degenerating into hate speech. However, all the focus group participants agreed that the main source of hate speech was the online media, especially those outlets that do not filter and moderate comments. “In general, user-generated content is the main problem in spreading hate speech and that is where we should start. We should make some examples in this respect,” said FG participant 1. “It seems harsh to talk in this way, but we do need some punitive mechanisms within our community. I understand that some hate speech is published to get more clicks, but this is a harmful practice and we must cut off the channels that use this kind of language,” said FG participant 3.

Another FG participant suggested that trying to engage in self-regulation and establish the proper mechanisms is a slow and lengthy process and does not always work.

“We can learn also from the practice of social networks in this respect. They have the practice of reporting on hate speech or problematic content, and they react immediately. We can also do a similar thing, telling our audience that we are giving them this mechanism, and they should use it,” said FG participant 5.

2.3.2. Journalists and editors on hate narratives against journalists and media trust

Asked on their opinion of journalists as a target of hate narratives in public communication, all the participants agreed that they were certainly a target, though there were differing opinions on whether this group was a main and primary target of such hate narratives. Cases of verbal abuse and debasement of journalists and their lack of integrity has been a constant feature of the public debate, but this trend has intensified in recent years. The journalists referred in this respect especially to the language and role of Prime Minister Edi Rama, who is often far from diplomatic with journalists, describing the media as a “rubbish bin,” ridiculing journalists and claiming they are incompetent or unprepared.

“We as journalists are undoubtedly among the main targets of hate narratives, reflecting also the repeated narratives of the Prime Minister against the media. In a way, this practice has allowed people on the street and online to see journalists as a category that can be attacked. The Prime Minister is the highest authority in terms of communication; he has the broadest access to all the media, uses his own media outlet, and there is an immense possibility of repetition. The repetition of these narratives through different channels has led to a solidification of the lack of trust in the media from citizens,” said FG participant 3.

Another FG participant brought up the example of an interview with a citizen, who, when invited not to be politically biased, turned to the reporter using the exact terms that the Prime Minister uses to describe the media, meaning that this has become part of the common language used against the media.

Other FG participants agreed, but they said that the problem cannot be limited just to the narratives of the Prime Minister. The problem is that journalism as a profession is no longer respected. While hate narratives do play an important role, that is not the only impact.

“This used to be a respected profession, citizens used to look at us with respect, and this is no longer the case. It has been a very gradual process, and now, ignoring or verbally assaulting a journalist is no longer a problem. The whole profession has been devalued, it is a gradual but consistent process that has led us to this point,” said FG participant 6.

While the focus group participants recognized the harshness of political hate directed at journalists, it was highlighted that this is only part of the problem in the hate narratives against journalists. Another major problem is the fact that particular media outlets or journalists also attack their own colleagues and the solidarity within the community is missing.

“We have cases of news portals attacking some specific journalists without proper arguments to do so. This becomes part of the public communication and the public tends to believe such narratives. Ultimately, this is discouraging and has a chilling effect on our work, as we tend to stop and think that our turn will come, too,” said FG participant 2.

Other focus group participants agreed.

“We see cases of articles being published that throw mud at hard-working reporters, and they are published even if the editor knows that this is not the truth. This is not acceptable and leaves a very bad taste; you give space to unproven charges and work against your own colleagues. If we do not defend our own colleagues, how can we expect the public to trust us and defend us?” highlighted FG participant 5.

In addition, the focus group participants identified other factors that also come into play and reinforce the existing practices of hate narratives against journalists.

“In a way, journalists are also a victim of the populist discourse. This discourse has as its main element the identification of the leader with the people and hate against elites, including the media elite, leading to a natural turning against journalists, even when there is no reason to do so,” said FG participant 1.

The situation with professionalism in the Albanian media currently also has not helped. “We must admit that within our profession we are not all angels; there are also blackmailers among us, people who publish information just to achieve a particular end,” said FG participant 6, noting that this does not help with the public trust in journalism. At the same time, another FG participant

mentioned the introduction and reinforcement of the culture of fierce verbal clashes in the television debates. “These ugly episodes lead the public to believe that we are all the same. We find ourselves within a vicious circle, where the media is still trusted but public faith is continuously weakening,” said FG participant 5.

The media professionals in the focus group were rather pessimistic about finding ways out of this vicious circle. “Unfortunately, I do not expect any improvement in this respect anytime soon. We also see the developments in the region, and the climate that has been sown is harsh against journalists,” said FG participant 2.

“We are facing fundamental problems, and it is difficult to find a recipe. Perhaps an example can be the so-called NGO media, namely the non-business model. They are the only ones that seem to work for the moment, not affected from politics and economics. While influence of donor agendas is still there, they remain for the moment islands of integrity; if they can join and become a peninsula, it would be a very good thing,” said FG participant 1.

2.3.3. Gender-media issues

Both the public in the opinion poll and the media professionals in the focus group were asked about the situation with gender issues in the media, more specifically the problems faced by women journalists and their overall position within the media scene.

Graph 10. *The following statements refer to the position of women journalists in Albania. On a scale from 1 to 4, how much do you agree with each? - Agree (Marks 3+4)*



Source: Ipsos, 2021.

The public had a high perception of the issue of women journalists in Albania often being the target of attacks; namely, 69% of them thought that this was the case. At the same time, 71% related this exposure to gender prejudices and stereotypes, whereas a higher percentage, 81%, thought that this was more likely to happen because they disclose the truth. Even more people believed that the authorities should protect women journalists in cases of threats

and attacks. The poll reveals that there is a significant sensitivity among citizens that women journalists are more often exposed to harassment or to threats for doing their job, but also because of their gender, and also a strong solidarity towards them.

The focus group participants were divided on whether gender tended to affect the position of women journalists and the difficulties they face on the job. One of the FG participants brought her own experience, saying that when reporting on politics especially, women journalists tended to be more exposed to threats and harassment.

“When you report on political protests, or from the headquarters of political parties, you are surrounded by militants, and I was very careful in choosing my words, as this might create unnecessary exposure, so this has affected also my reporting,” said FG participant 4.

On the other hand, another woman journalist in the focus group said she had not experienced any discrimination because of gender. While generally agreeing that even in the communication with woman journalists there was a tendency especially of politicians to devalue their questions because of gender, the FG participants also brought examples of instances when interviewees had been equally harsh to male counterparts. The percentage of women journalists is perceived to be high, and newsrooms are often made up of more than 50% of female staff. However, this number might create a false sense of lack of discrimination. “My impression was that gender-based harassment or exposure is not an issue due to the high number of women journalists, but some studies and discussions of this nature have shown that this perception might be wrong,” said FG participant 1. The tendency of women journalists to keep quiet in cases of harassment was another factor the focus group identified as keeping awareness on such a problem at a minimum. According to FG participant 3, women journalists face more discrimination within the newsroom, rather than from external factors, especially in terms of workload and salary.

3. CONCLUSION

The opinion poll and the discussion with journalists provided interesting insights into the current public perception of media trust and the factors that contribute to such trust, as well as to the overall understanding of the public of media issues. The poll confirmed the dominance of television as the main source of information on a daily basis, as well as the most trusted source of information, especially for age groups above 45. The increased use of online media and especially social networks both in terms of frequency and as a source of information is another visible trend, reflecting the overall widespread use of social networks in the country. The proportion of people who tend to trust the media was only slightly higher than those who do not trust it, which should be a warning bell for the media community. At the same time, the public also believe that media independence is poor and that they tend to spread disinformation and hatred, probably even more than social networks.

The focus group discussion with journalists was an opportunity to probe the problems with their own profession, but also a way to face the public trust in them. In general, the journalists believed that the public trust in their work more or less coincides with their own perception of the situation, but the poll also revealed some findings that were paradoxes hard to explain. One of the main explanations for such discrepancies that came out of the poll was the lack of the due critical skills on media conduct related to increased propaganda effects and absence of media literacy policies for the public.

Journalists described that the current public perception of media trust was an effect of both internal faults within the media community and increased negativity in public communication on journalists, coming mainly from political sphere. The role of social networks and online media in opening the gates to floods of unethical comments and hate speech was also a factor that cannot be ignored, which has in a way legalized the right to verbally assault the media and journalists in all kinds of manners. The poor response in terms of self-regulation from the media, combined with unethical conduct from media itself, has not helped to ease this problem that contributes significantly to lowering of trust in the media among citizens. Lack of solidarity among media professionals was also a major source of self-criticism, along with the failure to react even minimally against propaganda efforts vis-a-vis the media.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The media should offer an option for users to reach them for complaints and respect the principles of publishing corrections or confutations if necessary.
- The media outlets should review a policy regarding ethics in communication and comments and user-generated Comments in general.
- The media should consider policies on the use of ready-made material from official sources, such as labelling it, editing it and contextualizing it.
- The media can consider the option of public reaction and reporting improper content related to disinformation and hate narratives.
- Efforts for the improvement of media literacy efforts should be ongoing from all actors. The government should engage in the adoption of a strategy and clear policies on the inclusion of media literacy as part of the curriculum in an appropriate form. Civil society actors should continue and intensify their efforts to raise awareness of critical thinking and media literacy in society. Public institutions and civil society should coordinate in this regard, possibly also engaging the media as a supporter of these initiatives and policies.
- Efforts to engage in media literacy initiatives should employ different formats, targeting all age groups, in order to cover the gap that exists in terms of media literacy skills.
- Public awareness campaigns highlighting professional standards and achievements in the media should be organized more frequently, contributing to the public debate on media conduct.

Literature and sources

Londo, I., (2020), "Hate speech, propaganda, and disinformation in Albanian Media, SEENPM, <https://seenpm.org/research-hate-speech-propaganda-and-disinformation-in-albanian-media/>

Londo, I., (2021), "Hate narratives and disinformation in online media in Albania", SEENPM, <https://seenpm.org/research-hate-narratives-and-disinformation-in-online-media-in-albania/>

Ipsos opinion poll for the Resilience project, March 2021.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUP:

Participant 1: male journalist of a national television station.

Participant 2: female journalist of a news television station.

Participant 3: male journalist of an online media and host of a television programme.

Participant 4: male journalist of an online media outlet.

Participant 5: female journalist of a television station.

Participant 6: male journalist, columnist in print media and for television programmes.

About the author

Ilda Londo holds a degree in Journalism/Political Sciences. She holds the position of Research Coordinator at the Albanian Media Institute. She is the author of several research works, focusing on media development issues, media ethics and professionalism, and analyzing media content.

This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The third series of research reports examines TRUST IN THE MEDIA in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Nine media development organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey have joined forces under an EU-funded project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey'. The three-year project is coordinated by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM), a network of media development organizations in Central and South East Europe, and implemented in partnership with: the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0 in Pristina, the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica, the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje, the Novi Sad School of Journalism in Novi Sad, the Peace Institute in Ljubljana, and Bianet in Istanbul.