

OPINION IN THE MASS PRINT MEDIA OF ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

In the print media in Albania, opinions are a very controversial part of the way public discourse is created. Positioned in the capital of Albania, they often circulate the same information. Important in this genre of information are: comments, analysis and opinions in editorial form, and headlines. It seems that the most important information is served on a golden plate for the public that is being overloaded and bombarded by other media such as television, radio, or online media. Mass communication here unfolds in a wider range, that, apparently informative, turns into a game with gates between political camps. Opinionism openly announces its strategies from one medium to another where more than the public benefits those who make these opinions, i.e. journalists, politicians or explicitly linked exponents for the purposes of political communication. On the other hand, we see a lot of spectacle in the form of entertainment and so far the information stagnates. Necessary information for citizens is missing. This paper tends to theoretically analyze the genre issues of opinion in the print media.

Keywords: convergence, discourse, diversity, editorials, homogenization, opinionism, sensationalism

Introduction

Opinion is an important form of daily information from the print media. Opinions, as a form of communication of many current issues and the most important events are highly preferred by journalists, various political and social figures. In addition to the latter, there are editorials, genuine comments or analysis, or reviews of cultural fields. Opinions sometimes structurally overlap with analysis as well as opinion comments so they become a mixed genre for orienting public opinion. They are

preferred in headlines primarily on the front pages of newspapers and then they are structured in a particular sub-theme alongside news, chronicles, or daily reports.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the problems of the genre of opinions in the print media. The hypothesis of this paper lies in the fact that the print media as in previous periods follow the same model, of the importance of opinion as an overlapping political act to reinforce the central messages of actuality. They are positioned primarily for political purposes.

The editorial agenda of the print media gives importance to opinions for political purposes by generalizing its discourse. If observed more closely at the general discourse of information in the print media, we notice that politics absorbs most of the information and opinions on other topics fade. Gradually, information turns more into political propaganda than broadly informing a specialized opinion of public figures in the print media or journalistic opinion. What problems are identified around this situation? This descriptive analysis tends to analyze this situation somehow.

Theoretical Context

Since the French Revolution opinion leaders have been the people who represented the political discourse and the highest social rank in representation. According to French scholar Francis Balle in his book "Media and Societies", the press of the 17th to the 19th century had a diverse and politicized expansion. This time defines a wide public opinion and leading figures of political journalists like the writer Honore de Balzac. He states that: "By ceasing to be a mere instrument to enable the circulation of news, the press stimulates public discussion by continuing it: in this case, it plays the new role of mediator between a wider public of citizens and political power" (Balle 2011, p. 45).

This time is otherwise considered the golden age of media politicization by politicians. "The newspapers of small political groups succeed in both Paris of 1789 and that of 1848: one in two politicians has his own newspaper. From February to May 1848, 450 clubs and over 200 newspapers could be counted in Paris alone. The publishers of the press provided the newspapers with a material infrastructure, without really showing them" (Balle 2011, pp. 45–46).

On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon tradition evolved differently and there are claims that American and British journalists invented the modern concept of the news by inventing and developing discursive practices of journalism such as reporting and interviewing. According to Jean K. Chalaby "this practice evolves further due to the independence of the press from the literary field, parliamentary bipartisan, the ability of newspapers to derive substantial revenues from the sales and advertising, the dynamics of English Language and because of the Anglo-Saxon central and dominant position in the world" (Chalaby 1996). In order to further analyze the relations between state and press and other mass media, in the fifties Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm developed four basic theories of press: the

authoritarian theory, the libertarian theory, the social responsibility theory, and Soviet communist theory (Siebert et al. 1956).

Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) offered three models of media approach and when compared to the peculiarities, the media system in Albania could be categorized within the model of the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model. This model is characterized by an elite-oriented press with a relatively small circulation, a corresponding centrality of electronic media and freedom of the press, and the development of commercial media industries which generally came late; newspapers have often been economically marginal and in need of subsidy. By further developing this model, the authors argue that the main reason for referring to it as Polarized Pluralist Model is due to the fact that they believe that these patterns are rooted to a large extent in the high degree of ideological diversity and conflict that characterizes these Southern European countries as a result of delayed development of liberal institutions. Another reason, according to them, is connected with the strong role of the state in society, a strong role of political parties once the transition to democracy is achieved, a continuing importance of clientelism, and a weaker development of rational-legal authority (Hallin, Mancini 2004, pp. 73–74).

According to many scholars, this journalism is already surpassed by a number of factors that brought about the revolution of the meaning of doing media in the 21st century. Thanks to digitalization, convergence, technologies, and inclusion in various Internet and Web 2.0 platforms, as well as to public opinion and audiences, communication that behaves differently from past Gutenbergian logic has undergone a change in information and news. Yet the same behaviour is seen despite the fact that information technology has advanced and the media have gone through a long stage of professionalism and profiling of journalists, giving and receiving goes back to the symbolism of the old messages. Pierre Bourdieu, a researcher and sociologist of communication, in his book “On Television” states that: “The competition between newspapers, the competition between journalists and television, the competition between different TV channels, takes the form of a time competition to catch the scoop to be the first” (Bourdieu 2015, p. 35). And this is just the beginning, in order to expose the information in each media in competition with each other, the logic of concentrating all kinds of opinions and comments is added. This scholar in relation to these opinions calls the opinionists who make them superficial and with a clearly defined agenda around politics. He thinks that haste brings quick opinionists who are prepared for everything that happens in reality; he calls them “fast thinkers”. Furthermore, he states:

If television privileges a certain number of fast-thinkers who produce cultural fast-food, pre-chewed, pre-thought cultural food, it does not happen simply because (and this is also part of succumbing to haste) they have a contact list that is always the same: that in fact there would be room even for people who really have something to say, i.e. young, still unknown immersed in their studies, who are not inclined to frequent the media, but it takes time to look for them and

find them, and why waste time when the latter is always available, ready to write their opinion or to give it to the ordinary media (Bourdieu 2015, pp. 37–38).

In this line is also communication researcher Stephan Russ-Mohl. He calls these types of public figures for such opinions in the media “telegens” and agrees with the analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s information: “Editorial offices usually use the same telegram experts, who in Italian are called ‘tuttologists’, ‘holologists’, whom the French sociologist Pierre Bordieu once labelled ‘fast thinkers’” (Russ-Mohl 2010, p. 37). At this point, according to him, it approaches as banal and false debates.

According to Paolo Murialdi in *Reset* (in December 1994), daily journalism suffers from a heavy dependence on television. “I notice a great dependence on television. It can be direct or indirect. Direct, in the sense that there is a lot of talk about television. Indirect in the use of expressive forms, reminiscent of that of radio and television” (see Colombo 2008, p. 246).

Another communicative scholar, Gianfranco Marrone, an in-depth scholar of semiotics, states: “Meanwhile, from a communicative point of view, opinion newspapers continue to prefer the fatal function to the referential one, signing – as we will see trust agreements with its readers for market purposes, which go beyond the tasks of pure information” (Marrone 2008, p. 97). According to him, fact and opinion change the place where opinionism serves to prove a political purpose rather than factual information itself. According to him, this type of journalism brings a narrow audience for those who are interested in opinions and what you should do to give information to your followers as you do. He states: “On the other hand, by acting in this way, you ultimately create your own audience to produce interests and expectations that may not have existed before: by tending to fill the newspaper with gossip, you manage to arouse interest in gossip: by gradually eliminating the reviews in favor of the interviews, the readers will receive the reception for the interviews; reducing the place of the political chronicle and increasing that of the black chronicle will produce readers or viewers less and less interested in politics and more and more curious about faits divers” (Marrone 2008, p. 107; Eco 1977, p. 107).

According to researchers Russ-Mohl and Dietrich Schwarzkopf, the advertising economy reaching a wider audience has led to information coming from entertainment and sports.

On the other hand, this means laconic, simplified information, presented as redeemed as possible. Added to this is the abandonment of behind-the-scenes interdependencies, especially in audio-visual media. Walter Homberg speaks of ‘Molloist journalism’ and presentation-oriented jockey journalism, while the French philosopher Paul Virilio even speaks of ‘pollution of reality’ (Russ-Mohl 2010, p. 37).

Russ-Mohl is concerned about this type of journalism that goes away from professionalism, according to him, a factor that leads to this situation are the economic causes of the market.

Even the commercial causes are the ones that lead to sensationalism, putting chronicles on sex & crime in the foreground but also igniting political emotions. If we do not want journalism to be degraded and perverted, we must have a strong debate on ensuring journalistic quality (Russ-Mohl 2010, p. 37).

Researcher Bernard Pule reflects the media information landscape with the same concern:

The big media have become like blind people following each other, covering the same issues at the same time, revealing the same analysis together. And, since, deeply, it is through the media — and polls — that politicians try to understand their country, there is room for serious concern. The media function more and more through emotions and instant things, that is why politicians are doomed in their rush (Fuga 2014, p. 535).

For the panorama of opinionists jumping from studio to studio, communication scholar Dominique Wolton thinks:

The guest becomes the guarantor of the system. And it often comes down to the same guests circulating from studio to studio; they always have a production — book, disc, spectacle — that needs to be promoted. Add to this some dexterous politicians in front of the cameras, some technocrats tasked with thinking about the world, and this is where this famous environment came from, from radio to television, from press articles to dailies, from festivals to lunches abroad, constitutes that close circle of a self-proclaimed elite (Wolton 2009, p. 55).

And here the argument of the scholars is presented as a symbiosis of discourse from media to media, a symbiosis of information for mainly political purposes and of course public information that, more than facts and information, we correctly intend to disseminate broad opinions where political propaganda should prevail.

The Landscape of Mass Print Media and Opinion-Making in Albania

The media landscape in Albania is diverse and in various media forms in its industry. In this landscape, the mass print media, which have mainly been in the form of daily newspapers, are of great importance. Newspapers in Albania were liberalized and pluralized after 1991 with the establishment of the democratic system. They have had an increase in their curve in the 28-year lifespan of building the democratic state. Although the landscape has undergone a series of reconstructions and constraints on newspapers, in Albania there are a large number of press bodies. Referring to the year 2015, the Albanian Media Institute (ISHM 2015: 9) states:

Albania has a rich and dynamic media landscape, with about 250 electronic media outlets and 25 daily newspapers. Currently, Albania has two national commercial television stations, 71 local television channels, 83 local cable television channels, and two commercial multiplexes. Of all the existing analogue television stations, the public broadcaster Radio Televizioni Shqiptar (RTSH) has the largest coverage: its signal covers 80.5 of the territory, followed by Top Channel with 79 percent and TV Klan with 78 percent. (ISHM 2015, p. 10).

This is where the national editorial agenda model predominates. Inevitably this model of representation in a limited geographical position, and of a multitude of daily media will raise the tabloid journalism of sensational character and that of the public.

According to the professor of communication at the University of Tirana and researcher Zylyftar Bregu in his book “Technology of News”, Albanian journalism is a combination of informative and tabloid. He states: “In Albania there was never a separation of form and content. Even the most serious newspapers have an element of tabloid format” (Bregu 2017, p. 68).

In this analysis, academician and professor of communication and journalism at the University of Tirana and communication researcher Artan Fuga proposes that the Albanian media is suffering its lowest stage in generalist journalism: “The second important challenge that is faced by the Albanian media has to do with the outdated profile of their orientation simply as a generalist media” (Fuga 2014, p. 495). Analyzing the factors that worsen the Albanian media environment in relation to information, he thinks that: “The Albanian media landscape today violently lacks precisely the thematic profiled media and local media that are almost in terms of transmitters of information coming from other television channels or digital platforms, are more signal renewal antennas” (Fuga 2014, p. 495). In a comparative logic he approaches the former analysis of Ezra Park in America regarding the factors that lead to the evolution of Albanian journalism. From a model of informative journalism then emerged the model of a political journalism that was dominated by political communication, as well as led by politicians vis-à-vis a small audience. Then, according to him, the independent press was born. Although these stages have taken a long time in the western world, in Albania these stages have been developed for a very short time, for 27 years. According to the researcher, a fourth stage of the media is not being passed, the transition to professional, profiled media. They remain in the phase of generalization that due to the market and orientation of receiving information, their administration turn into media that tend more to homogenize the information and serve more for general opinions than present concrete facts. More than the news media, they turn into spectacle agencies where the discursive dissemination of opinions and political analysis prevails. It orients an Ezra Park analysis of the media stages to the final stage, that of information profiling, and highlights:

But Ezra Park also talks about a fourth phase, which apparently our media is still not able to overcome, he said that even within the framework of independent media there is a slowdown over time. The number of titles grows towards infinity, while the audience does not grow at these rates. Since the print media are generalist, they transform the same general information. If not the same, more or less the same, the interest for the media falls. (Fuga 2014, p. 499).

Political journalism in Albania takes place in a strong field of discourse between the two camps of political parties that line up, opinion leaders, political figures, politically oriented journalists according to both poles, and the political leaders themselves. Polarization according to the two political ideologies of the main parties in Albania, the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, is added to the satellites of other parties that seem to reinforce this discursive polarization, which increases the possibility of generalist information as a political spectacle. Information should guide the camps more than it should be true and in the interest of all sorts of public problems that are placed as of secondary importance or towards their extinction in the media agendas.

According to the professor and political scientist, media analyst Afrim Krasniqi, in the history of the media, generalization is emphasized as much as amateurism, which is a factor plus of reinforcing opinions rather than deepening information according to the respective fields. He states that:

In practice, the Albanian media is cosmopolitan, comprehensive, giving up specialized media in relevant fields, for example, there is no specialized media in the field of justice, police, education, health, immigration, national minorities, etc., while each of these topics happens to be addressed by the same newsroom and the same journalists who cover the politics of the day, the black chronicle, international news or routine activities of institutions (Krasniqi 2014, p. 222).

Extreme politicization also happens to journalists. “In the practice of journalism, everyone expresses their point of view more than a uniform point of view, but from the position of a journalist politician, everyone identifies with the party, imitates the leader and becomes as party and militant as the parties previously criticized by them” (Krasniqi 2014, p. 225).

This type of mechanism is strengthened especially in election periods. It is noticed that the space on pages dedicated to opinions is by political leaders, with the addition of itinerant opinionists who jump from one media to another, and in some cases, by one opinionist with many articles in many newspapers. Added to the abundant problems of media politicization is the important fact that media owners themselves have direct or indirect interests in politics. “Media owners freely used the media to secure favors and promote their interests to both major parties. Many media owners flattered government leaders to secure favors and avoid taxes” (ISHM 2015, p. 55).

Added to this situation is a series of interview bombings that are copied and pasted from television to newspapers, where television moderators are among the

most popular in the daily newspapers, and they are even listed as newspaper journalists and as the most successful journalists. An added discourse by specialists and experts in various fields leaves much less space.

Based on the Global Freedom Scores, Albania was evaluated as partly free country and in the report it is mentioned that the parliament passed two laws that allow governmental agencies to hear complaints from individuals alleging defamation from television stations and news sites. These laws were strongly opposed and criticized by Albanian journalists and the Council of Europe, which warned that would harm the freedom of expression (Freedom House 2021). In Montenegro and Serbia, independent journalists, opposition figures, and other perceived foes of the government faced ongoing harassment, intimidation, and sometimes violence. Public frustration with the entrenched ruling parties boiled over into large protests in both countries, but they failed to yield any meaningful change (Freedom House 2021, p. 17). Also in the Index for the year 2022 from RSF, freedom of the press in Albania was rated as problematic and among other findings “editorial independence is threatened by partisan media regulation, the physical integrity of journalists is undermined by organized crime, the state’s failure to protect them and even by police violence” (Reporters Without Borders 2022).

During the transition years, Albania saw the establishment of a relatively complete legal framework for the protection and development of media freedom and independence. However, in many cases, the legal framework was delayed or a mechanical transplant of Western legislation. Enforcement of legislation remains a problem. In the framework of relations between the media and politics, both in the early transitional phases and during recent years, there have been frequent efforts of political formations to ensure some kind of control in relations between media and politics in Albania, and over the media through law as in the case of the Press Law or the case of legislation establishing the regulations for the election of the Steering Council of RTSH and AMA, which gives the opportunity to the political majority to decide on the composition of the steering bodies of these two institutions (Zguri 2017, pp. 50–51).

Conclusion

From this analytical description of this treatment some conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the genre of opinions tends to be superficial information about the very fact that it should fulfill the discourse and be as informative as possible for the massive level of the audience. This genre is criticized by public figures not at all to be greeted professionally in their identification of banal but amateur dimensions in the orientation of public discourse.

The print media is especially interested in politicizing this genre for political gain and the purpose of the discourse in most print media in Albania is also openly political. It reflects how the media identifies with their mission. This also confirms our hypothesis regarding the inclusion of information politicization of this genre.

Albanian generalist journalism, being interested in opinions for political purposes, leaves behind many other topics that are necessary.

Opinionists are political figures or journalism professionals who jump from one media to another and bombard the general discourse for political purposes with a general opinion and are by no means even specialized in the field of information policy-making. They have blocked political communication in close interests between the two political trenches of the main parties in Albania, between the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. They bipolarize their thoughts and analyses. Independent and especially specialized opinions are negligible compared to dependent ones. They find no place in a general, sensational as superficial discourse of the print media. They do not want to jump to a more advanced stage than that of their TV profiling and specialization as they are thus more ready for political messages and more influential in the society called mob or mass. The media themselves, from the owner to the journalists, are structures ready to end up in political service, journalists and even political militants. Their interest is more a political mission than a service of a qualification of public opinion in the service of an emancipated society, a mission of journalism in essence.

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STRESZCZENIE

Teksty opiniotwórcze w prasie albańskiej

W albańskich mediach drukowanych opinie są kontrowersyjną częścią procesu tworzenia dyskursu publicznego. Media mające siedzibę w stolicy Albanii często rozpowszechniają te same informacje. Ważne w tym kontekście są: komentarze, analizy i opinie w formie redakcyjnej oraz nagłówki. Wydaje się, że najważniejsze informacje są podawane na złotym talerzu dla publiczności przeciętnej wiadomościami z innych mediów, jak telewizja, radio czy media internetowe. Komunikacja masowa rozwija się tu w szerszym zakresie, który, z pozoru informacyjny, zamienia się w grę między obozami politycznymi. Opinie różnią się w zależności od mediów, a największą korzyść przynoszą nie odbiorcom, ale opiniotwórcom, tzn., dziennikarzom, politykom i ich przedstawicielom. Z drugiej strony widzimy dużo elementów rozrywkowych i jak na razie niewiele się w tym względzie zmienia. Brakuje informacji niezbędnych dla obywateli. Celem artykułu jest teoretyczna analiza kwestii gatunkowych dotyczących tekstów wyrażających opinie w albańskich mediach drukowanych.

Słowa kluczowe: konwergencja, dyskurs, wstępniaki, homogenizacja, opinie, sensacyjność