

The Common Albanophone Media Market, between Reality and Utopia

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Abstract

Even though the albanophone media operates in a common space, of a geographic continuity and a population that speaks the same language; this media is divided in three separated markets, within the geographic borders of the Republic of Albania, Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia. Practically, there are no political barriers for the distribution of the media products in all these markets. Especially, after the independence of the Republic of Kosovo and the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, that somehow solved the situation of the Albanians in Macedonia, there are no political barriers in the communication process among the Albanians.

Even though the conditions created have been favorable, there have been not so many attempts to create common media spaces. After 1999, the TV channels have been the first to start the attempts in creating common albanophone media space. The creation of this joint media space through the visual media has been facilitated also from the satellite transmissions of the most important TV channels in Albania and in Kosova. In this common communicative space, the Albanian TV channels: Top Channel, Klan TV have the biggest audience in Kosova and in Macedonia. The Kosovar TV channels or the TV channels of Macedonia have a much smaller audience in Albania.

On the other hand, only Top Albania Radio and Radio Tirana have an audience in a part of the territories inhabited from Albanians in Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro. The other radios cannot transmit outside the territories of the Republic of Albania, Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia. Only in the cross border areas between Albania, Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro, some local radios have an audience that goes beyond the local communities within the territories of the country they transmit.

The press is a medium with the most limited communication in the albanophone area. Practically, the Albanian print media that is

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published in Albania, Kosova and Macedonia it is not distributed outside of the territories of these respective countries.

The creation of a common albanophone media space is made possible only through Internet. Almost, all the forums, blogs and the online newspapers in Albanian language target the audience of all the Albanian-speaking area.

The perspective of the creation of a unified albanophone media space is still far. Living in different political and social realities makes it impossible to create a powerful media that can operate in areas inhabited by Albanians in the Balkans. The language, ethnicity and the common culture are elements that are favorable of the integration of the media space, but apparently they are not decisive elements in this phenomenon. The TVs and Internet are more advanced in this regard, because of the advantage that the technology offers.

Key words: *Albanian-speaking media market, political barriers, media products, common communicative space, geographic borders*

Introduction

Even though the albanophone media operate in a common space with geographical contiguity and with a population speaking the same language, they are fragmented into three markets separated from each other according to the geographical spaces defined by the land borders of Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Each of these markets functions independently, and only in rare occasions do products of one market get distributed in other markets.

There are practically no barriers to the distribution of media products from one market to the other. With the creation of the Republic of Kosovo and with the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which solved the issues of Albanians in Macedonia to some extent, there are no more political barriers to communication among Albanians. The border between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Albania is almost formal, likewise the circulation of goods and citizens between the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Macedonia is free and relatively without barriers. The same applies for the Albanians of Montenegro. What is more, geographical distances between Tirana, Pristina, Skopje, and Ulcinj are insignificant.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson has argued that “the convergence between capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation”¹. In the case of the creation of the imagined community of Albanians, it has historically been proved that two of the factors mentioned by Anderson, the print technology and the language, have played a key role. The questions that arise at this point are: Why does the language and the media, which have created the imagined community of Albanians (the nation) challenging historical circumstances and political barriers, fail to transform the imagined community (the nation) into a real society in a common communication space when these circumstances change and barriers fall? Why does the albanophone space remain culturally differentiated, and the albanophone media market dysfunctional exactly when the third factor (capitalism) is added? How can the imagined community turn into audience, reader, user, and what are the barriers to this transformation?

The study treats the way the albanophone market functions taking into consideration three of its components: the distribution of products, the convergence of albanophone media businesses, and the relationship between different media and the albanophone audiences.

The theoretical approach of this study is based on the theories of media economy, mainly on the contribution of researchers such as Gylan Doyle, Nadin Toussaint-Desmoulin, Jean Gabszevicz, Nathalie Sonnac, Pickard, and Artan Fuga. Their theoretical contribution is considered appropriate for this study because it creates the possibility to make a critical analysis of the albanophone market according to an economic logic, thus avoiding the critical ideological-nationalistic analysis which characterises such studies on cultural and media communication in the albanophone space.

¹ Anderson. B. *Komunitete imagjinare*. (2013). Lindje – Perëndime. Tiranë. p.69

The albanophone media market as it is

The first attempt to create an integrated albanophone market began after the 1990s, when the Milosevic regime closed down the major part of the media in Kosovo, including the radio television of Pristina. Albanian public radio television took on the satellite transmission of news programs for all the areas inhabited by Albanians, as well as for Albanians who had emigrated in Europe. The program was partly financed by the government of the Republic of Albania, and partly by the Kosovo government in migration. In 1991, *Rilindja* newspaper started to be published in Tirana instead of Pristina, where it was published up to that time. Along with the *Rilindja* newspaper, the publishers tried to move a part of the publishing in Tirana, which was also facilitated by the opening of the Rilindja Publishing House.

Until 1999, the Albanian section of the BBC and Voice of America radios transmitted for all the Albanian media space, and the programs in Albanian from these radios were transmitted at the same time, reporting news from all the Albanian spaces with correspondents in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania.

In 1999, private television media started attempts for the creation of a common media space of albanophone communication. The creation of this common media space through televisions was boosted by the satellite transmissions of some of the most important Albanian TV channels in Albania and Kosovo.

Two of the media companies which have had an economic approach to the albanophone media market include Klan media group, and Top Channel media group. Klan has opened its branch in Pristina, Klan Kosova, while the Digit Alb platform has turned into a company that operates in all the albanophone space: Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Presevo Valley, as well as in all the countries where Albanian emigrants live. However, this communication is almost one way because the TV channels of Kosovo and Macedonia are not highly watched in Albania.

Only one of these TV channels, AL Sat, was created as a TV channel oriented towards a national information market, but it turned out to be an economic failure for until now it has managed to be

imposed as a major albanophone media only in Macedonia, while it has almost gone out of the market in Kosovo and Albania.

Among the radios, only *Top Albania Radio*, and *Radio Tirana* are listened to in a part of the territories inhabited by Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. The other radios are not able to transmit outside the Albanian territory. Meanwhile, in border areas between Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, some local radios have audiences that go beyond the local communities within the territories of the country they transmit from.

Printed press is the medium with a more limited communication in the albanophone space. The Albanian newspapers which are published in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro are not distributed outside the territories of the country where they are published. This does not happen due to the incapability for distribution – as a matter of fact, newspapers published in Albania are distributed in Athens and Thessaloniki, cities which are located at a much longer distance from Tirana, than is Pristina from Skopje – put due to the failure to sell in Kosovo and Macedonia newspapers published in Tirana. Similarly, newspapers published in Kosovo or Macedonia have failed to be distributed in Albania.

The creation of a real albanophone media space has been made possible only through the internet. Almost all the blogs and on-line newspapers in the Albanian language are addressed to audiences from all the albanophone areas. This is exactly the main barrier – probably the only one – to world globalization through internet communication, i.e. the language, which enables the creation of ethnical audiences, as in the Albanian case.

The book market is better integrated, even though it has characteristics of one way communication, especially in the distribution sector. Publishing houses operating in the Republic of Albania circulate much more books in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro than publishing houses in Kosovo and Macedonia do in Albania. In Kosovo and Macedonian book shops you can find almost all the books published in the Republic of Albania, while in Albanian book shops you can find almost none of the books published in Kosovo, Macedonia, or Montenegro. In addition, the policies of the

publishing houses are more oriented towards a limited market within the geographical borders than towards a market in a common cultural and linguistic space.

The need for an economic orientation of the albanophone media market

The experience of these years shows that the utopia of national unification is not enough to enable the creation of a common pan-albanian communication space and a common albanophone market. An economic approach is needed. Media industries are considered as economies of scale, and as such they become more and more efficient from the economic point of view with the increase in the number of readers, listeners, viewers, or users of a media product. According to Gillian Doyle "economies of scale are said to exist in any industry where marginal costs are lower than average costs. When the cost of providing an extra unit of good falls as the scale of output expands, then economies of scale are present. This is summarized by the function coefficient (FC), which measures the average costs (AC) to marginal costs (MC): $FC=AC/MC$ "².

The same researcher connects the existence of media economies with the fact that their products are public goods. "For media firms, marginal costs (MC) refer to the cost of supplying a product or service to one extra consumer. Average costs (AC) are the total costs involved in providing the product or service, divided by its audience. In most sectors of the media, marginal costs tend to be low and, in some cases, they are zero. Marginal costs are virtually always lower than average costs. Consequently, as more viewers tune in or more users visit a content service website or more readers purchase a copy of a magazine, the average costs to the firm supplying that commodity will be lowered"³

Language is first and foremost an economic asset in the media industries because the language in itself constitutes one of the two

² Doyle, G. *Ekonomia e medias*, (2013), Papirus, Tiranë, p.28.

³ Idem, p. 28.

outputs of these industries, i.e. the content, which is enabled through the language.

Albanophone media are developed in contradiction to the principles of media economies for they do not make use of the two main media outputs: the audiences and media contents. The audience is considered as a major value for each media product because it is exactly the audience which is sold to advertising companies. The profits coming from advertising companies are then used to cover the cost of content production in a fragmented way in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, or Montenegro, thus lowering the possibility of maximising the profit through expanding the audience within the boundaries created through the circulation of contents codified in the same language and in the same cultural area.

The other type of media output - i.e. the content - according to Dyle, has its own characteristics: the content is a cultural good and their value for consumers is symbolic and tied up with the information or messages, rather than with the material carrier of than information (i.e. the radio spectrum, the digital file, etc.). Messages and meaning are intangible and do not use up. So, media content is not 'consumable' in the purest sense of this term. The initial cost of creating a public good can be high, but then marginal costs for extra unit are almost zero. As a consequence, the more the audience expands, the more savings do media firms get⁴.

If the Albanian media had applied this economic logic, they would have set up strategies for their economic development in the production of outputs which go beyond the territorial borders. Thus, by expanding their audiences, they would lower production costs, and would become more attractive to the advertising companies. Of course, there is an external barrier in this case, which is related both to the media economies and to the non-media economies. Picard claims that media markets are considered as "markets of dual products", in the sense that media firms simultaneously produce two different goods, which are sold to two individual and separate groups of consumers: consumers of media contents, and other industries

⁴ Idem, p. 27.

through advertising. The lack of integration of other economic markets in the albanophone space is discouraging for the creation of an integrated media market because the production companies are not interested to advertise products in places where they are not actually present in the market.

Conclusions

Despite operating in a common space with geographical contiguity and with a population speaking the same language, the albanophone media are fragmented into three markets separated from each other according to the geographical spaces defined by the land borders of the Republic of Albania, the Republic of Kosovo, and the Republic of Macedonia.

In this paper I highlighted that this situation can change if media institutions build their strategies on an economic logic, based on some economic principles of media markets, which aim at bringing the production cost for each extra unit to a minimum, if not zero. For this reason, turning from the nationalistic rhetoric into a pure economic logic would enable the creation of a real communication space among Albanians, a real albanophone media market, with a much lower cost and more beneficial both for the public and the media industries.

There are practically no barriers to the distribution of media products from one market to the other. With the creation of the Republic of Kosovo and with the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which solved the issues of Albanians in Macedonia to some extent, there are no more political barriers to communication among Albanians.

There have been few attempts for creating a common media space, although the conditions were favourable. After 1999, television media were the first to start attempts for the creation of a common media space of albanophone communication. The creation of this common media space through televisions was boosted by the satellite transmissions of some of the most important Albanian TV channels in Albania and Kosovo. But, in this common communication space, Albanian TV channels such as Top Channel, and Klan are more

watched in Kosovo and Macedonia than Kosovo TV channels are in Albania.

Among the radios, only *Top Albania Radio*, and *Radio Tirana* are listened to in a part of the territories inhabited by Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. The other radios are not able to transmit outside the Albanian territory. Meanwhile, in border areas between Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, some local radios have audiences that go beyond the local communities within the territories of the country they transmit from.

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The creation of a real albanophone media space has been made possible only through the internet. Almost all the blogs and on-line newspapers in the Albanian language are addressed to audiences from all the albanophone areas.

The perspective of creating a unified albanophone media space is still very distant. Living in different political and social realities makes it impossible to create powerful media operating in all the places inhabited by Albanians in the Balkan. The common language, ethnicity, and culture are elements that support the integration of a media space, but apparently they have not yet turned into economic assets.

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