

NEW MEDIA AND OLD MALADIES

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Abstract

In Albania, the use of the term 'new media' is novel. Actually, the adjective 'new' is not very much liked and instead the term 'online' is often used. This, of course, has to do with the fact that internet penetration in Albania occurred relatively late, but also with the slow satiation with information through traditional means and communication channels, such as television, newspapers, and radio. The media landscape changed when additional internet providers entered the market, including the mobile telephone companies and the 4G network.

This article is not concerned with internet penetration in Albania, or defining 'new media' and 'online media', but rather to address the question is 'new media' new? Does it offers only a new communication platform, an additional instrument, more efficient, faster and more tangible, and just that, or is there a new communication quality, a different narrative and, maybe, there is a possibility of change?

A case study of former Prime Minister Sali Berisha can be used to show that communication has not changed in essence, but only in form. Mr. Berisha now delivers most of his political speeches through a new media: his official Facebook page.

Keywords: new media, traditional media, Facebook, communication, context

ENTRY

Sali Berisha is very proud of his high-tech communication gear. During plenary sessions of Parliament, he always takes his iPad with him, and even holds it up when speaking from the Assembly's podium or during interviews with journalists, as if to give more power to an argument. He often refers to his iPad; you can even find it listed under "Interests" on his official Facebook page.

This is not Mr. Berisha's only technological 'triumph': his official Facebook page has the highest number of followers among Albanian politicians, leaving behind the two younger ones: Lulzim Basha, the current head of the Democratic Party, and Edi Rama, the country's Prime Minister (the other prominent politician, Speaker of Parliament Ilir Meta, does not have a Facebook page or Twitter account). Mr. Berisha, despite his age and a certain perception about his generation's clumsiness when it comes to social networks, has one of the most followed pages, even compared with the young *celebrities*, including here the likes of Ermal Mamaqi, Genta Ismajli, and Elvana Gjata.

Since Mr. Berisha is a political figure, and has lead the country for half of the 25-year post-communism period, his profile in the typology 'new media' should be a case study on its own. This, not only because his relationship with the traditional or mainstream media has been very different from the aforementioned people, but also because politics and media in regard to each other have other specifics. One of them is noted by the scholar Ardian Vehbiu:

Pluralism in Tirana has always leaned on the side of segmentation, in the sense that parties, or social poles, have imposed on all sectors, including that of communication, a feudal model of dividing into plots, according to area of influence and political support. It has been in the direct interest of political elite to control the media, even in those cases when the opposing party is in control; because oligarchies prefer polarization to independence, in the sense that they want to make sure that they are standing face-to-face with their enemy, not the public opinion as such.

This observation of Mr. Vehbiu that Mr. Berisha moved his political “speeches” to Facebook in the second half of his second mandate as Prime Minister of Albania, explains Mr. Berisha’s withdrawal from one of the main communication forums --Blendi Fevziu’s talk show *Opinion*. Mr. Berisha never made public the reasons behind the alienation from one of *Albania’s main political debate arenas*, but his absence from ‘Opinion’ and his appearances at the studio of Mr. Fevziu’s direct rival, Sokol Balla’s Top Story, provides the answer.

Where Mr. Berisha shined with his absence, was beaming the outline of friendship gone ‘sour’, even though the motives were never made known. In the dark on these motives was also the journalist Blendi Fevziu, who, in an interview for the daily ‘Panorama’, said that he didn’t know why Mr. Berisha did not prefer his studio anymore.

Mr. Berisha became more active on Facebook, especially following his defeat in the June 2013 elections, when he also resigned as chairman of Democratic Party of Albania. The former leader of opposition and former Prime Minister became a “Facebook oppositionist” with his daily status updates. Each one of them was reported by the traditional media, erasing the borders between the new and old media. On top of this, the former Prime Minister, with a fluctuating periodicity, holds press conferences with the reporters of traditional media, but it’s safe to say that Facebook is his daily newspaper, radio, and television. From Facebook, he ‘addresses the nation’. On Facebook, Mr. Berisha is still Prime Minister and chairman of opposition.

DOES THE NEW MEDIA EXIST?

The example of former Prime Minister Berisha, is analogous to the observation of Angela Phillips, who characterizes the new media as the same ole’ the post-modern communication -- *old sources with new bottles*.

What Phillips is trying to say is relevant with what has happened and is happening in Albania, just like in the rest of the world – The narrative of what is being said has not changed, and neither has the chronicler who says it. The only difference is that now they have moved to a new window from where they speak. We are dealing with a new bottle (Facebook, Twitter, etc), but the sources of narrative are the same (Sali Berisha, Edi Rama, Donald Trump, etc)

This is not only the case of what can be called *brand new media* (i.e., social networks similar to Facebook), but also of the *new media* (internet or online sites of traditional media).

Ardian Vehbiu says: *Albanian online media, even though a little late in comparison with their sisters (in the west-author’s remark), were created from the beginning as extensions of traditional media—in the sense that existing newspapers and magazines purchased web space and started placing or uploading there, in essence, the same materials that were being published in print, only that this time they were available for the reader free of charge.*

It looks like we are in a paradoxical situation: the new media has arrived but they have not changed much. At least in Albania, the sites of traditional media have transformed into the new media by going online, but by using the old tools and the same team of journalists.

According to a study of Albanian Institute of Media, the sites of traditional media are more popular than those created recently. Mr. Berisha’s case, of a dinosaurs’ transcendence into the new planet of Facebook while the narrative remains the same illustrates this.

Lisa Gitelman and Goeffrey Pingree argue that “all media were once new media.” Here we should add that classification of postmodern forums as “new media” means that the previous are “old”. Still, many examples show that the discovery of New Media is more or less like arriving in the New World: the territory is new, but those walking on it, populating it and filling it with old and new rituals are the same.

Ardian Vehbiu continues: *Even the unprecedented blooming of social networks, blogs, online forums and pages of comments has prove, and continues to prove, paradoxically, that all of WEB 2.0’s rich and diverse productivity can’t give a sustainable value, independent of the traditional media---or of those magic spaces*

where the raw information is intermediated and processed.

As for the Albanian case, another scholar of communication, Ermal Hasimja, uses the terms 'democratic context' and 'authoritarian context', alleging that the latter has triumphed at the expense of the former. Thus, new media have added noise, participation, and the illusion of democracy, but they have not facilitated, let's say, an *Albanian Spring* in communication. There is not one case in Albania where the new media has been used for the same goals as Facebook and Twitter were used in the case of the *Arab Springs* – to bring a change or a new social context.

CONCLUSION

A simple search in the platform itself (at the section dedicated to creating ads for the Albanian audiences) showed that number of Facebook users in the beginning of 2015 was nearly 1 340 000 people. Of these, 860 000 were males, and 480 000 females.

At first glance, the fact that in Albania the number of male Facebook users is twice that of females seems 'innocent'. But it's not like that. The concept used by the scholar Hasimja for 'authoritarian contexts' is, among other things, also explained with this fact, in appearance unrelated to "great things". Also, as it is explained by the patriarch social context, and so forth. The sad conclusion is that new media are, in fact, new technologies in form, but in content they are the old.

The aforementioned examples illustrate this point of view. Is this the fading of great expectation, or simply a link in the long and old chain of social and technological processes? Both. In any case, lost is the illusion that the new media would serve as a cure for the old communication maladies.

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