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Political Communication and Journalism in the Balkans

About journalism in general

The process of informing is becoming one of the fundamental social processes, and the true, fast, accurate and complete information is a foundation of the democratic society and the political participation The method of creating information has become a subject of the academic interest and social practice as individuals from various spheres, such as politics, business and culture are affected by it. Journalism in Macedonia can not be yet called an established profession. Namely, in Macedonia, as opposed to the U.S. for instance, anyone can be a journalist, regardless of his or her education. There are interdisciplinary studies in journalism at the Law Faculty in Skopje, which have been existing for the last 30 years, but for which there is relatively little interest.

These trends have made important the professional training of journalists in order to be able to interpret social reality. Journalists have realized that it is essential to have a continuous journalist training through innovation of knowledge and a constructive practice in media. Journalism is less and less tied to talent and skill, and more to formal education. Many journalists do not have formal education. The journalist power and dignity of profession is directly correlated to the intensity of media's influence in modern society as well as the possibility to manipulate public opinion - a possibility which is not vested in any other profession, not even in the government itself. Citizens nowadays (readers, viewers, listeners) are much more exposed to journalist interpretation of reality, than to factors that one-sidedly convey individual positions.

The shape of this profession is changing and with it is also changing the status and the evaluation of journalism in social frameworks. Journalists have become an influential, privileged and untouchable elite. There are various interpretations and theories that differ based on the idea of the role of journalism in society as well as on the quality and type of accountability that journalists have. Despite the fact that often journalism is accused of impairing the consensus which is necessary for the functioning of democracy, it still secures a forum for the different and opposing opinions. This is a result of the development and the use of new technologies in modern journalism (the intellectual level of the audience and the importance of media in society). The theories that demystify the social role of journalism differ in two main

aspects. According to one aspect journalism has a passive role (gatekeeping), while the advocates of the second aspect see journalism as an active factor and a spokesperson of the socially neglected groups – it investigates and reveals scandals and problems. It also sees journalism as a bridge between the socially neglected groups, as a pedagogue and a scout.

Historically, journalism has had its own development path, a "ripening" of the profession, its establishment and the introduction of professional criteria. Certain criteria and standards of conduct are being introduced in journalism, even if it is not to the extent being done in other professions (doctors, architects, etc.) This impulse for progress comes from within the profession, from its ethical essence, from professional associations and from the relevant departments at universities.

Most young people are attracted to take up journalism based on two fundamental values of journalism – freedom and the impulse for truth and objectivity. The ideal for truthfulness and objectivity has always been a complex concept. In the history of world journalism there are examples of many journalist sacrifices for accurate information and honesty in reporting. Often it is believed that the strive for the truth in reporting is a utopist attempt. Objectivity in journalism is not an individual concept, but a category tied to many related concepts: empirics, experiment, methodology, perception, positivism, and subjectivity. Such an explanation of objectivity actualizes the problem of journalist methodology and research. This is mainly related to the research work of the journalist whose aim is to detect the cause-consequence relations in social events.

With the development of media two types of journalism can be identified: reporting and interpretative. Today we can mostly speak about interpretative journalism. The reporting journalism presents events, answering to the questions: who, what, where, when and how, whereas interpretative journalist places events within the coordinates for the causal-consequential importance, i.e. it offers answers to the questions why and what next. The journalist is a professional who describes and analyses events (occurrences, individuals) as a result of gathering of all available facts in an effort to allow the audience to better interpret them. The interpretative method of elaboration of the subject is in correlation with the contemporary need the information to have depth and to be complete. A prerequisite for such information is to find the hidden facts through journalistic research. Such journalism is a barrier against manipulation. The need for research in journalism is a result of the need for interpretation of events, which in turn is a result of the increasingly large presence of media in society and in the crisis situations (wars, economic crises, social restructuring, etc.) Today the event is not only observed as an isolated, individual case, but as a link in a chain that connects the causes and consequences.

Interpretative journalism is "reporting by the use of facts, which without a comment sheds light and explains the event" (Ellmore R. T.,1992).

The journalist is required to have a high level of intellectualism, wide general education and specialist knowledge in certain areas (sports, culture, politics, ecology, medicine, etc.).

Taking into consideration the history and communication factors of interpretative reporting, it can be clearly seen how modern information is becoming more in-depth, fuller and ideologically neutral as well as its genesis. Uneducated journalist cannot be competent enough for the area for which they have been assigned in the editorial and are unable to use the methodology of journalist research. In order for the journalists to use journalist methodology it is essential that they know at least the fundaments of theory and the most and often used research techniques and procedures, which are best elaborated in the methodology of social sciences, particularly in the methodology of social research. The studying of these methods must be incorporated into the process of journalist education. This will contribute to the acquiring of intellectual criteria and analytical skills. Especially important is the studying of the techniques for gathering information. The strategy for gathering information is "a product of the same spirit which connects methods of research in history, the method of work of intelligence agencies and the scientific method. The journalist research method - the search for facts related to current events that can be verified, is expressed through having initiative, observation and in-depth research – digging".[2]

The public today is all the time more educated and it imposes the need of impartial and highly educated journalist. The high intellectual level of the audience, the educated and active journalists and the development of public journalism[2] put pressure on the false and partial reporting and are the main factors that condition the need for quality and interpretative information based on facts and argumentation. Such quality of information can only be a result of a new type of journalism that has appeared at the end of the 20th century, and in which base is the educated and research oriented journalist-specialist, who apart from the timely, full, and accurate information can also offer an explanation, i.e. an in-depth analysis, which in turn is a prerequisite for a straightforward and accurate conclusion.

2. Political communication and media – Information trends in te Balkans

At present, the criteria for the democratic equality is untouched and clean zone for communication between those who ruled and the ones who are ruled. In the hands of the ruled ones the only shield and corrector to the authority remains the public opinion. Political communications are mainly institutionalized through media. Analogically, in the political analytics debates regarding the misuse of the political

communications are directed in two ways: firstly the structuring of media systems, and secondly, the misuse communications through ways and technique with which public opinion and understanding of the citizens are formed and creating with the aimed of taking over and main the authority.

In the first case there are two media systems: American and European ones. In the American model, the co called corporate oligopolism, there is no presence of state media. The public debate is a market merchandize which interesting enough for someone to buy it. I

In the European model of the media organization the degree of control depends on the type of political system. In practice, the state media are mainly on the hands those who ruled the state. The Republic of Macedonia belongs to these model where the political public traditionally is no treated as a market. Here, the political socialization in which, at present the media are key factor, is different.

In the second half of the 80s and in the 90s, the Balkan states were faced with serious economic and political challenges whose impact altered the logic of social living. These changes were simultaneous with some other crucial changes taking place at the world level. While the so-called Eastern Block was faced with radical social changes, the global changes that the world faced were, above all, of a technical and technological nature, the repercussions of which had their great impact in the area of communications. The development of remarkably fast communication systems in the 1990s introduced a different quality of information and of mutual understanding, in addition to a greater world- wide interdependence which in turn led to a swift globalization (economic, political and cultural).

After World War II, the Balkan countries, with the exception of Greece, lived in what was commonly known as the communist block. During this period the majority of the Balkan countries underwent a process of fast emancipation that increased the literacy rates of the population to a significant level compared to the European average. Hence the Balkan countries had a very specific historic experience that differed from the experience of the other European countries. The Cold War division of the world into two blocks continued until the end of the 1980's. This fact traced the path of development and of specific perception of the rest of the world. The historical experience of the Balkan states, the collective memory and life under the specific political system (that produced extensive closure) resulted in formation of stereotypes and prejudices in the perception and understanding of the world. The mobility of people was very low, and in some countries it was almost impossible. People received information about the latest world developments through the media owned by the state. In other words, the state had a complete monopoly over the diffused information. The media were often viewed as a means for disseminating socialist culture and values.

This already established perception of the world, as well as the dominant social psychology in the Balkans, began to change as a result of the changes in the socio-political systems, but also under the influence of the new means of information which was made possible by the new media: the satellite and cable TV, the Internet, the video and videotext as well as the computerization.

These technical and technological changes have contributed to new types of communication flows, bringing about changes in the social relations. The theory (it is also partially confirmed by research), points out the social power of media as well as the significant role played by the media in the distribution of information, the creation of public opinion and the global power of suggestion. The sociologists refer to the contemporary society as information society in which the information and its diffusion have a central meaning. The term *information society* associates mostly with the new media (product of the technological revolution) and the new means of transmission. When we talk about information societies we think of the societies in the developed countries where the computer and telecommunication technologies are widely accessible, a great number of people are employed in the information sector, the average spending on information products is remarkably high and the number of analysts of the information tendencies is growing. How many of the Balkan states participate in these tendencies?

The events that happened in the Balkans at the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's give us a rare opportunity to observe the role of media in the contemporary socio-political developments. The media were the key promoters of national identity, national consciousness and cultural identity. The political changes that happened in the media sector were expected to provide freedom of information and competition by means of pluralism. One of the first tasks was to transform the centralized media and their monopoly role. In the Balkan countries and most of Eastern Europe the state- owned media took over the role of national media. That was the case with the Republic of Macedonia as well.

The analysts of the media sector in the Balkans noticed two parallel processes: first, the creation of national media and second, the transnationalisation, due to the simultaneous presence of the processes of technological change and convergence. One of the common characteristics of the Balkan countries and Eastern Europe appears to be the lack of legal regulation in the media sector. The new media share some new characteristics that facilitate the development of a new way of communication deprived of the old features such as unilaterality, simultaneous distribution to the mass audience and the absence of interactivity.

In this respect, most of the communist Balkan countries, including Macedonia, are still challenged by the construction of a new media system, both in terms of technical modernization and in terms of legal definition of its media system. Hence,

here arise the problems of media monopolization, cultural protection, human resources, etc. The legal regulation of media represents a problem at global level as well. The legal regulation is hindered by certain economic factors and the fast technological innovations. One of the major problems regarding the media regulation is the monopolization of media. It worries the theoreticians of democracy because it threatens the competition and the quality of political communication. These are the two main guarantees of a democratic system. Some of the possible solutions to the problem of monopolization suggest recognizing the domination of only few media corporations and preventing the creation of new monopolies as well as establishing a stable and attractive public sector which would be the key factor in preventing the creation of new media corporations.

The media manipulation and its emancipatory role are the two main factors that impose the need of establishing a high quality legal framework in the media sector. Manipulation is an extremely harmful tool because it distorts reality by omitting the relevant facts that are necessary for having a complete understanding of the issue or by misinterpreting the present facts. The objective is to mislead the audience in order to achieve certain political or economic goals. According to Rainer Geissler there are two types of manipulation: in the first case certain élites or a class of people occupy the mass media, in the second case a mass political culture is being produced by means of the market- economic mechanisms (maximizing the recipients).

The emancipatory role of media is crucial for the contemporary world. In the contemporary societies the number of young people who expand their knowledge via Internet is constantly growing. Books begin to loose their popularity. In the future the media will continue to have the most important role in education. "With its ideologically death subjects as well as difficult and boring courses schools can not compete with the mass culture and its shining idols. But when they understand that and they try to imitate the mass culture and its way of presentation the schools only trivialize their subjects without making it less boring" (Mils, 1951). Yet, many sociologists warn that mass media direct their attention towards attractive and interesting issues from our lives neglecting those that are less attractive but nevertheless very important.

The developed European countries have already taken into consideration the great influence of media while preparing their teaching programs. They include subjects whose main objective is to develop the student's capacity and responsibility for critical understanding of the messages delivered by the media. Unlike the developed European countries where there is a long tradition in scientific and academic following of up to date media and information trends, it should be highlighted that the first departments in Macedonia were opened after the year 2000,

mainly at newly established private universities. Thus there is a great need in literature, staff as well as in research projects, exchange of students, etc.

A good media system and a thoroughly organized media policy is crucial for the integration processes in the Balkan societies. The introduction of cable and satellite TV imposed the issue of the diasporic or transnational audiences within the sector of the international public opinion. The diasporic audiences are composed of members of national minorities or communities that live in one country (ex: the Indian community in Great Britain, the Turkish community in Germany, the Moroccan community in Spain, the Albanian community in Italy, the Hungarian minority in Romania, the Macedonian minority in Greece and Bulgaria, etc…) Researches conducted in the Republic of Macedonia (Panova. 2000, 52-53) demonstrate that ethnic communities in Macedonia primarily follow satellite programs of their kin countries, followed by their interest in privately owned TV stations on ethnic grounds. The third in popularity are the commercial Macedonian TV stations, and the last is the Macedonian National Television. When it comes to diasporic audiences the same occurs in the countries of Western Europe, an example of which is the Turkish community in Germany. Such technological revolutions (satellite TV) in the area of communications (the possibility of diasporic communities to follow programs of their country of origin) seriously influences their attitudes as a political subject and a participant in the current politics of the country in which they live. In the Balkan region, where the use of cable and satellite TV is widely spread, the video and audiocassettes are not as important as in Iran, where vast part of the population lives in media isolation.

When we talk about new media the latest novelty is the multimediality. Multimediality represents an intersection of computers, telecommunications and media. "Four technological trends have contributed to these developments: first, the constant improvement in the capabilities of computers, together with declining costs; second, digitization of data, making possible the integration of computer and telecommunications technologies; third, satellite communications development; and fourth, fibre optics, which allow many different messages to travel down a single small cable. The dramatic communications explosion of recent years shows no signs of slowing down" (Giddens 2006, 594).

In this domain, the digitalization (the transfer of electronic signals by transforming them into binary signals) is one of the greatest technological achievements after the discovery of cable and satellite TV. The main characteristics of multimediality are: interactive use, integration of different types of media and digital technology. According to the way the personal computer is being used the multimediality can be classified into two forms: open and closed. When the user is connected to a telecommunications network through infrastructural network we have open multimediality, referred to as Internet.

"The Internet originated during the Cold War period that preceded 1989. The "Net" developed out of a system used in the Pentagon, the headquarters of the American military, from 1969.This system was firstly named the ARPA net, after the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency. The aim was limited. The ARPA sought to allow scientists working on military contracts in different parts of America to pool their resources and to share the expensive equipment they were using" (Giddens 2006, 594).

The web was discovered in 1990 by a software engineer who worked at a Swiss physics lab and it was popularized by an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois.

The discovery of Internet was a real boom in the information sector and it led to great social transformations. This sophisticated communication network is owned by nobody and it is available to everyone. The greatest advantage of Internet is its capacity to develop a dynamic interactive communication. People from different parts of the world communicate with each other via this network[57]. This communication develops in accordance with the personal needs, interests and affinity. The possibilities offered by this revolutionary discovery are various: information diffusion, education, self- promotion and shopping. In addition the Internet absorbs the conventional forms of communication such as: conferences, congresses, round tables and other types of debates. It is feared that the Internet could wipe out the other media in their original form. However, it is still difficult to predict what the impact of Internet would be. For example, the discovery of radio and TV, which was considered a great advancement compared to the press, did not cause the disappearance of the last.

The theoreticians consider the Internet the basis of the new global order that appeared during the last years of the 20th century. The Internet is spread rapidly and spontaneously. The diffusion and use of Internet depends on money. Therefore, according to available data, the Internet is still, more or less, a privilege of the developed countries. One of the main conditions for the expansion of the Internet is the number of personal computers in use. Whether a family will own a computer and an Internet connection depends on its financial status. This correlation between the standard of living and the quality of information reveals that Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are among the countries in Europe with the least use of the Internet. In most of the Balkan countries the old media (such as newspapers, radio and TV) are still holding a dominant position in the information process. The change of

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[57] According to some researches the number of Internet users is approximately 35 million people. It is estimated that the annual Internet traffic growth rates in the period 1985- 1998 were close to 200%.

the socio- political system led to a free information flow and media pluralism, though with a disputable quality.

In this context the Balkan people know very little about the socioeconomic and political circumstances in their neighboring countries which has negative implications on the economic cooperation. The lack of information and true understanding of the other leads to the creation of stereotypes and prejudices which affects negatively the cultural cooperation not only in the Balkans but in the entire world as well. To a great extent it is the result of the development of the so called agency journalism (journalism that depends on news agencies). Very few of the Balkan media have a developed correspondent network; therefore most of them depend on the news distributed by the large global news agencies. These gigantic transnational corporations dictate the quantity and quality of information as well as the structure of the news system in the world. "The big four western news agencies, Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters and Agence France- Press (AFP) are the heart of the world's news systems, pumping basic information from their headquarters to newsrooms throughout the world, whether English speaking or not" (Herbert 2000, 13).

It is estimated that internationally there are approximately 200 top journalists who enjoy the confidence of the establishment. They hold the monopoly over the information regarding the international diplomatic relations and they regularly attend all international events as reporters. As a result of their professionalism these journalists very often are given the role of advisors.

Due to the high costs, it is financially impossible for one media (radio, TV or newspaper) to have its own correspondent network that will cover the whole international arena.

The national agencies perform the key role in the distribution of news in each country and they are followed by the four transnational agencies. The national agencies serve as a filter which prevents the information aggression imposed by these gigantic world agencies.

When it comes to media and the dominant social opinions the issue of media and cultural imperialism or globalization can not be omitted. A global media order has already been established. If we scan the real situation we will notice a network of corporations in which the different media aspects (press, film, TV, publishing activity, music) are combined in order to form global communication corporations that possess the greatest part of the global flow of images and information. Some of the theoreticians criticize the current situation and talk about cultural imperialism. This refers above all to the invasion of Western culture, meaning the American cultural domination.

Regarding media and entertainment, the social psychologists talk about the narcotizing disfunction of media. This refers to the loss of critical consciousness as well as the decrease in productive social engagement of people under the influence of media. This is achieved by giving too much space and time to cheap entertainment. Via the process of commercialization, media become a means for moving people away from the real life problems such as: economy, politics, social responsibility, etc…

The globalization of youth culture happens at very fast speed. The key role in this process is performed by the TV station MTV which is specialized in music television. This TV station appeared in 1981 in the US and it begun working in Europe in 1987.

In 1980's the European countries begun implementing quota (for non-European media contents) in order to protect themselves from the American influence. The sociologist McQuail (McQuail 1994) believes that there should not be any concern regarding the influence of the transnational media, especially in the case of Europe, because the cultural influence comes from a culture which is historically fond of Europe. In the Balkans this type of protection is still not debated in debates and it is completely absent in the audiovisual politics.

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