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The role of media in political communication: the case of Kosovo

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Abstract. There can be no all-encompassing communication between politics and citizens without the multi-dimensional involvement of the media. As a result of the great influence the media exert, politics makes use of instruments of influence and establishes complex relations with the mass media. In this process, a journalist for politics is an important factor, albeit with the most difficult status. Journalist should establish multilateral relations with several stakeholders simultaneously: with the media, with the community and with the political factors. These are the circumstances that place the journalist at the heart of political communication. In the era of Internet, political communicators have started using new ways to communicate – the “new media”. However, the role of the journalist and of the mass media remains important in performing political communication. What has changed though is the profile of media companies, which should withstand the process of convergence and the profile of journalists too, as this convergence requires multitask journalists.

Keywords: media, politics, communication, journalists, Kosovo.

1 Introduction

Political communication in modern societies cannot be achieved entirely and successfully without an active role of the media. Politics needs media to convey its messages and daily activities to the public. Politics aims to achieve through media the support needed to attain the goals and mission it has assigned to itself in the society. On the other hand, the media becomes part of the political communication as the sender of the message, the intermediary, and the shaper of public opinion on the political realm. “In fact, it is unknown whether it is politics that uses and subjugates the media or whether it is the media industry that uses and consumes politicians. We have more a mutual process of interests that are rationalized in an instrumental manner rather than the domination of one actor versus the other”. (Fuga, 2014, p.524)

The relations that established in the framework of this interaction depend on the general level of democracy in the society where they take place; on the general political and media culture, and on the special and diverse values that are an integral part of the respective society. Regardless of the space that media dedicate to the political developments and to the politicians, in particular in the capacity of political communicators, they also establish broad and complex relations with politics. The relations become so close and intertwined that the scholar Brian McNair reaches the conclusion that “now, to a greater extent than ever before, the media are politics, and politics are the media”. (McNair, 2002, p.29) Both parties initially get involved in the process of mutual communication through which they aim to achieve often different goals. Politics aims to convince the citizens through the media on the reasonability of its activities and positions; the media, in their widely accepted role in Western democracies of a “watch dog” of the public and political area, should fulfill their mission to the benefit of the public and to provide useful information to advance the level of democracy. In this process, the media and the politics influence on each other and are influenced by each other.

2 Dependency and inter-dependency between politics and the media

“Considered as an art and practice of the government, politics is inseparably an action and conviction; an act on the course of events to influence the life of citizens; and at the same times an attempt to convince every citizen with the purpose of substantiating the decision taken and achieve their highest possible efficiency. In this respect, communication is necessary for politics”. (Balle, 2011, p.63) Mass media are an efficient instrument to achieve political communication and its goals, as emphasized by Balle. The importance of mass media stems from the specifics of the channel used to disseminate the message. They possess the means, human resources and reporting techniques that make a message one that is understood easily and penetrates to the masses of people. The era of information and communication is the era of the mediatization of the society, and as part of it, of the mediatization of politics. The known influence of media as mediators makes politics pay special attention to and use its instruments to establish in the first place the communication with the media and afterwards, through it, to achieve communication with the citizens.

“Politicians and parties, the government and the opposition communicate publicly every day with one another; they use and instrumentalize the media and the journalists as amplifiers and ‘loudspeakers’, to apply their programs, interests and power goals”. (Mohl, 2010, p.26) Politics has its “instruments” of legal control and in many cases of financial control that it uses to influence on the “fourth power” – that of the media. The legal basis frames the space and boundaries of the freedom of the media. In this way, the political power renders the media power dependant on it, as it should exert its influence by observing the legal framework which not always in compliance with the standards and ethical and professional rules of the media.

In Kosovo there were two such UNMIK Regulations on the media (2000/36 and 2000/37). Whereas in 2012, the media and the journalists objected certain Articles of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which were deemed to endanger the freedom of the media.

The legal grounds that define state institutions and the political power influence directly on the functioning of specific media. One special way of influence, albeit indirect, is through the appointment of senior management positions. “Control over appointments can be a powerful instrument of subordination by ensuring a stationing of politically reliable individuals inside the media instead of obliging rulers to depend on the problematic impact of external pressures and sanctions on the behavior of communication staffs”. (Blumler, Gurevitch, 2001, p.63) Defining the scope, objectives and appointment procedures through state institutions is a characteristic of mainly the public broadcasters. In the case of Kosovo, the Law on RTK No. 04/L-046, adopted in 2012, defines that the selection of the members of the RTK Board is done through a public announcement and in the second stage, the issue is brought to the Assembly of Kosovo that establishes an *ad hoc* committee to do the short list of candidates. Afterwards, the list is submitted for the approval of each member of the Assembly. Therefore, the support of political subjects for these members who are required to be independent from politics is necessary for the final stage of their appointment.

Legal definitions influence in particular on the coverage of election campaigns by determining the reporting rules, including equal space for each subject that competes, regardless of the number of supporters or political power. However, equality changes right after the ballot boxes are sealed. In all cases, the media appear as a complex stakeholder in the political communication process. While on one hand the media is influenced by politics, on the other hand the media influences politics. Through the editorial policies, each media outlet runs its own politics, which often contradicts the claims and goals of official politics. Within the legal frames and in special cases by objecting, the media influence politics. To do this, the media avail of instruments like broadcast channel, ways of conveying and disseminating the message and the general social influence, which springs from its credibility among the public. This power enables the media to be selective and create space for those political communicators whom the media consider to be of more importance of the public. Only a small group of politicians compared to the general number of politicians acting in various political instances finds its own space of presenting in the role of political communicators through the media.

This is the same practice in Kosovo. Almost always the same representatives of political subjects are present in the media. In this case the media create space for politicians of higher ranking and for those who are able to “impose themselves” through means such as: eloquence, readiness to speak to the media, PR savvy.

In the case of political subjects there exists the reporting on activities of subjects of greater political prominence, which usually is measured by their representation in the Parliament. In instances of important political developments, almost all mass media focus on reporting the positions of the main parliamentary subjects, and less on smaller political subjects, regardless of whether they are members of the Parliament or not. In such case, the communication takes place through and between powerful political factors. As such, it creates room for discussion about the main professional principles that the media should adhere to: impartiality and objectivity. Through their efforts to always report on the current affairs and events that just take place and being focused solely on the powerful political actors, who usually are the most vocal ones, the media risks straying from its main role. It risks being transformed into the advocate and spokesperson of the powerful men in the country, instead of its role to serve the general interests of the community. However, through its role of a “watch dog” the media can maintain and cultivate its influence on politics and on determining the political agenda. From 1999, the important political processes that have taken place in Kosovo have been characterized at various stages by the great influence of the media on politics. Reports in important media outlets have influenced on changing the directions of political developments. As Stephan Russ-Mohl writes, “the way of presenting the news in a democracy influences the success or lack thereof of the political parties and programs, of the politicians’ chances to be re-elected. Therefore, a large part of the political activities is directed towards the media”. (Mohl, 2010, p.27) Consequently, as Mohl writes, the media and journalism are an integral part of the political system: as conveyors of the political-administrative decisions in the country, and as resonant ground for politics and administrative apparatus.

3 The role and status of journalists in political communication

The journalist is an important actor, albeit one who is in the most difficult spot in the relation between media and politics and in achieving political communication through the media. Journalists find themselves between competing interests of powerful actors. They are employed in media companies that have their own agendas that are achieved through editorial and financial policies; they are the professionals with ethical and professional obligations towards their occupation; they are the members of the community; they have contractual relations with the media company as the employer, but who not always are in line with the interests, values and principles they cultivate personally; they should establish fair multi-lateral rapports with other stakeholders simultaneously: the media, community, politics. These circumstances place the journalists of politics at the heart of political communication. Their status makes them establish multi-lateral and complex relations with all other factors: the employers, sources of information, and the audience. “The excellence of journalism” as political journalism is labeled by the scholars determines the profile of the journalists as influencers of social developments, and also influenced by representative factors and bearers of such developments. The freedom of the media and of the journalists as guaranteed by law, as the academic Artan Fuga emphasizes, are two different sides, often contradictory. “The freedom of the journalists to carry out their duty and mission is a value that requires a series of conditions to be met” reasons Fuga, explaining further that “this is about journalists having the opportunity and political, legal and professional security to be engaged in a journalism that is based upon its best values, i.e. based upon the accuracy of interpretations given to the public, upon balanced information, therefore giving and interpreting all expressed viewpoints on a certain event, upon its impartiality and objectivity that requires to enlighten all essential facts of a certain event or situation”.

However, it is hard to meet all these conditions given the reality of the media. The media are attracted by interests, including political ones. The professional principles of the journalists cannot always follow such interests. The first conflict occurs within the media, between the journalists and the media company.

The second conflict encompasses the relationship between the journalists, as representatives of the media company, and other specific political factors. In their role as “watch dogs” journalists confront the political interests and goals with the interest of the company they represent and the public to be informed about the misuse by political factors. Through the function of “spin doctors” and other instruments available, politics strives to establish relationships of partnership and good will with the

journalists. This relationship is filled with compromises by both sides but its essence is quite fragile because of the differing goals and missions of the journalists and political communicators.

“In their relationships of dependency on the government, the journalists cannot appear as merely willing collaborators or passive victims. The operations of managing news by governmental spin-doctors, by all means involves the journalists in an active process of selection, interpretation, assessment and re-construction of the information being presented”. (Kuhn, Neveu, 2002, p.133) In the societies that are considered to be fragile democracies, the professional status of journalists appears in all ways emphasized above. Journalists are willing collaborators in cases when militants of subjects that have political power appear as journalists and when these subjects establish media outlets as instruments of political propaganda. Journalists appear as passive victims in cases when they allow to become instruments of politics or media companies that protect the interests of a specific political subject. Both situations cultivate clientelist journalism, which strays away from the true professional principles and values. The third situation is the closest with the freedom of journalists and the use of professional principles by the journalists. They appear in the role of a proactive mediator who enjoys space and freedom to judge and have an influencing role on the process of communication. This freedom stems from the general mission of journalism is society as a service to and for the public good. “Journalists produce, at least among other things, public goods. Journalists are privileged and for this reason they should act responsible and consider well the consequences of their actions”. (Mohl, 2010, p.345) Mohl’s argument is applicable in the case of Kosovo. The media landscape in Kosovo has all three profiles described above. There are media outlets that are close to various political actors, media outlets that are guided by business interests and connected to politics, and media outlets that are guided by editorial policies that follow the principles of journalism and market competition. Such variety of media creates space for journalists of politics to carry on with their profession as per the choices they make. Those who are dedicated to journalism, find a media outlet that enables them to cultivate that and work in accordance with the principles they set for themselves. The era of “information and communication highways” has multiplied the channels of conveying messages, and has given rise to numerous mass media and other ones qualified still as “new media”, which in most cases are compared with the influence of mass media.

4 “New media” as new forms of political communication

“The digital revolution” at the beginning of XXI century has left its mark also on the ways of political communication, and is installing new relations between politics and “traditional media”. The political subjects and politicians have begun, on individual basis, to make use of the “new media” to disseminate their messages. Their messages are conveyed quickly via Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc., as text, audio and video and without using the mass media as intermediary. Communication becomes more direct and control over the message is managed more easily by the communicator.

A widely spread phenomenon in many countries has begun to spread in Kosovo too. The main political subjects and many politicians as well have replaced their releases, press conferences and other forms of statements to the press with their personal messages on their webpages. This phenomenon has intensified on the eve of and during two latest election campaigns (local elections in 2013 and early parliamentary elections in 2014). This phenomenon has both positive and negative effects. Messages are disseminated more quickly, in a more authentic way and without any selection process by the journalists. However, the new media offer the opportunity to communicate only with those who choose to see and receive messages. In this case, the constituencies are restricted in the “friends” list of the website profile and communication overruns information. In this situation, the mass media have several options: accept statements in social networks and other new media as sources of information, refuse its publication, or take that as a starting point for elaborating further, in a professional manner, the issues dealt with in these statements for the media. The media in Kosovo have begun to make use of all three options. They receive and convey with slight editorial interventions as one-source information the statements made by politics in the new media; depending on the editorial angle they give weight to the information or refuse it; they consider the statements in the new media as one of the sources for their stories.

This new form of communication is reflected on the status and role of the journalists. At first sight, it appears as if the direct communication through the new media has diminished its role and influence. However, it remains necessary. The power of journalism is focused on the context provided with the information, on the selection of useful information and its in-depth elaboration. To carry on with all these duties, journalists are needed but these should be journalists who adapt their reporting techniques to the new professional and technological requirements. “Mass information without a journalist degenerates, journalists are leaders of the opinions, the organizers and administrators of the information – the technology is not that, in spite of the fascination of our generation with technology, which at every new step it takes seems to receive natural glorification and is not seen with a critical eye”. (Fuga, 2014, 575) In this respect, the new media influence on personalizing the political communication but do not harm the role of mass media in the overall process of political communication especially when the mass media show capability of enduring the process of convergence.

5 Conclusions And Recommendations

The media appear as an important and active actor in the process of political communication. They are the intermediaries in conveying political messages and possess all required sources to give to the message the maximum influence on the citizens. Due to their importance, politics attempts to render the media as instruments and use them to disseminate political messages. Politics uses the legal basis and in other instances, the financial basis to frame the scope of the media. However, the legal grounds in the democratic societies are presumed to have an obligation to guarantee the freedom of the media and the respect for the “fourth power”. The relations between the political and media powers are always complex and are characterized by rivalry and partnership. Politics control the media and the media control politics by determining its agenda. The relationship they establish depends on the general level of democracy in the respective society. Journalists appear as important and active actors in the process of political communication through the media. Journalists are between the various interests of the media companies, political communicators and professional obligations towards the audiences. Journalists can be influencers, and also influenced by other factors. The new media have personalized communication between politics and citizens making that more direct. These media influence on the relations between politics and old media – mass media. Their role and the role of journalists in particular have changed with the expansion of the new online media. The new ways to achieve political communication require new profile of political journalists as well as managerial skills of the mass media newsrooms in the necessary process of convergence.

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