ALBANIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION – TOWARDS PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA: EXPANDING TO ONLINE MULTIMEDIA AND REMODELLING ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH AUDIENCES

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SUMMARY

The transformation of RTSH (Albanian Radio and Television) from a state-owned media to a public service broadcaster (PSB) has been challenging for many reasons, such as the internal organization of RTSH and the current trends of media convergence and digitalization. It is naïve at best to assume that RTSH can be detached from politics in a country like Albania, with its high level of politicization and continued confrontation between political parties. It is also not realistic to expect journalists to adhere to the normative standards of journalistic professionalism in isolation from the conditions in which they work. For RTSH to fulfil its remit of serving the public interest and to survive in a fiercely competitive media market, its transformation into a public service media (PSM) is a viable option, but it calls for remodelling its relationship with audiences and embracing the opportunities offered by media convergence in the digital area. This will enable more transparency and accountability; quality of programming; extended audiences and an increase in the overall profile and performance of RTSH.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of RTSH[1] from a state into a public service broadcaster (PSB) has been considered one of the most challenging reforms of the media system in Albania. The transformation officially started with the approval of Law No. 8410 on Public and Private Radio and Television in 1998. In the following fifteen years, media legislation and policy have changed several times, lacking clear vision, innovation and strategy and only addressing issues such as commercial media and digitalization. The primary drivers have been vested political and economic interests rather than the public interest.

RTSH is still far from achieving its mission as a public service media although it is funded by taxpayers' money. Despite positive developments and on-going pressure and assistance from the international community,[2] numerous challenges remain – including financial sustainability and transparency, professionalism and integrity, editorial independence, impasse of governing bodies and management, digitalization, programme update and audience reach – essentially hindering its public remit.

The transformation of RTSH into a public service media that is responsive to contemporary developments in Albania

Table 1: Type and number of media operators in Albania

Type of media in Albania	Number of media operators
National Daily Newspapers	29
Monthly Magazines	36
Quarterly Publications	69
Public Service Broadcaster	1
Commercial Audio-visual Operations with National License	5
Local TV Channels	56
Public Service Radio	1
National Commercial Radio	1
Local Radio	62
Commercial Multiplex	2

*Source: Audio-visual Media Authority, AMA Report 2017

is dependent not only on RTSH's internal issues as a media organisation, but also on the media landscape and political context in Albania. The process is additionally impacted by the redefinition of PSM at the European level.[3] Furthermore, a thorough and constructive debate regarding the role, relevance and future development of RTSH has been missing.

Amidst the complexity and elusiveness of the transformation of RTSH, this policy brief zooms in on the option of moving towards a public service media model. The brief first focuses on the contingencies of the transformation of RTSH into PSM – its political dimension and funding model. It then explores the application of multimedia strategies in the digital area and a remodelling of RTSH's relationship with its audiences. Finally, the brief provides recommendations for RTSH's online multimedia expansion and a remodelled relationship with audiences in the pursuit of becoming a genuine PSM.

2. CONTEXTUALIZING RTSH IN THE ALBANIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The media market in Albania is weak, small and fragmented (Table 1), and is far

from being consolidated. There is a dual broadcasting system, with RTSH as the public service broadcaster and a thriving private media sector.

The major challenge of the Albanian media landscape is clientelism – "a system of direct exchange between individuals or small groups where personal loyalty to a patron prevails over democratic decision-making, professional duties and ethical behaviour."[4] In this regard, some of the pressing issues include media ownership and transparency, its relation to politics, allegations of politically allocated state advertising, and the influence of big commercial advertisers.[5] This ultimately puts restraints on the media's integrity, professionalism, independence and quality of information. This symbiotic interrelation between media, politics and business is also reflected in delays and deadlock in media policy as well as in floating laws – frequent changes in legislation due to short-term political and other interests, resulting in legal uncertainty.[6]

The dynamics of the online media market and digital processes in Albania are difficult to evaluate due to the lack of credible and systematic data and research. However, the growth in Internet access

and ICTs in Albania, at least in urban areas, is omnipresent and there is a flourishing online media landscape with a variety of platforms.[7] Although the opportunities for participation and diversity offered by online media are obvious, the concern about quality of information and impact persists.

Currently Albania is undergoing the digital switchover process,[8] which, despite the expressed political consensus, has become a delicate and contested issue. RTSH has been assigned the leading role in the digitalization process, a demanding and controversial task. Its progress has the potential to profoundly transform RTSH, but, simultaneously, the digitalization process exposes the constraints on RTSH and presents various challenges.

3. GOVERNANCE: POLITICAL RELATIONS AND TRANSPARENCY

The current Law on Audio-visual Media[9] establishes the legal ground for the governance of RTSH. It is defined as a public provider of media services that offers audio-visual broadcasting, free and easily accessible for the entire population. The law stipulates three main governing bodies of RTSH: the Steering Council – the highest governing body; the General Director – in charge of the daily management; and the Administration Board – with an advisory role on financial and administration issues. The Audio-visual Media Authority (AMA) ensures that the public broadcaster complies with its legal requirements. However, in practice the transformation and reform of RTSH remain work in progress while its relations with political actors hinders its independence and overall performance. This is evident in the deadlock regarding the selection of the management bodies of RTSH (Steering Council and Director General), politically biased content that corresponds to the

interest of the incumbent government and relatively limited transparency and accountability to the public.[10]

For instance, the OSCE Office in Albania considered the ballots in Parliament for the election of the RTSH Steering Council in May 2015 as "politically motivated" and that "after initial attempts to elect the top management, the new Council has again become stalemated along party lines."[11] Furthermore, political clashes in the Parliament led to delays in electing the General Director for about two years. Consequently, in April 2016 the government amended the Law[12] and the Steering Council elected a new General Director by a simple majority. Controversies followed regarding the new Director, who had previously served as Chief Editor of the official ruling party newspaper and with alleged close ties to the family of the incumbent prime minister.[13]

In addition, the governing bodies' relations and lack of transparency affects the performance of RTSH. RTSH media professionals argue that "the uncertainty in legislation over the years, the delays in approval of laws and bylaws as well as the overlapping of competencies between the governing bodies of RTSH create bewilderment in the daily work of RTSH staff and thus hamper its normal functioning."[14] For instance, the Administration Board, which is supposed to be a consultative body on financial and management affairs, has also served in practice as a decision-making body, particularly during the absence of an elected Director General. What is more, RSTH operations have been disrupted by high profile court cases whereby managers and a former Director General have also been accused of alleged corruption and mismanagement of funds.[15]

Moreover the audit of RTSH performance by the High State Control Office in 2015

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found that the governing bodies' decisions are made available neither to RTSH staff nor to the public.[16] To date, RTSH has published financial report overviews for 2014 and 2015 only, and the Parliamentary Committee on Education and Mediums of Public Information has published reports of hearings with RTSH governing bodies in 2016 and 2017.[17] Moreover, the audit also found scattered and uncoordinated communication between the governing bodies and internal departments at RTSH, relying on verbal communication and limited institutionalised practices.[18] The Union of RTSH employees is rarely active and the Council of Viewers and Listeners does not have the capabilities to hold RTSH accountable. While the law may envisage for the accountability of RTSH to the public, in practice the mechanisms do not achieve their aim.

4. THE FUNDING MODEL: FROM MISMANAGEMENT TO SUBSTANTIAL REFORMATION

RTSH is not only funded by the license fee,[19] although that is the biggest share (approximately 70%), but also from public funding from the government, which reached a total of 25% of the overall budget of RTSH in 2014 and 2015. Other funding is secured from private sources such as advertising, but at a lower level, not more than 5%.[20] The current funding model is deemed adequate in generating resources for the RTSH operations. However, the main concern relates to practices of mismanagement of the RTSH budget and RTSH efficiency.[21] In 2015 the High State Control audit of RTSH found that the lack of an internal budget plan and framework for the implementation of the Digital Switchover strategy and digital age have led RTSH to mismanagement of both funds and projects, with higher costs and curtailed efficiency, thus hindering the return on investments.[22]

Furthermore, the same report highlights mismanagement of the human resources budget, which constitutes the second largest share of expenditure (35%), following the investments in digital networks in 2016. Some of the reported issues are: the enlarged ("swollen") administration with duplicate departments and personnel, frequent unjustified changes in the organisational structure and remuneration scheme and an overcrowded workforce.[23] In consequence, RTSH approved new internal regulations for its organisational structure and human resource management in early 2017 following the approval of the new Statute in December 2016.[24] While the approval of these fundamental documents marks progress for RTSH performance, the rapid implementation of the digitalisation process requires an essential reformation of the overall operations of RTSH, coupled with a business model that addresses the challenges ahead in the digital area.

5. REMIT IN THE DIGITAL AGE: TOWARDS INNOVATIVE DIGITAL PRESENCE AND AUDIENCE RELATIONS

The digital age, characterized by the ubiquitous proliferation of ICTs, a plethora of media platforms, programmes, services and an abundance of information and digital networks, puts into question the relevance of public service media. If PSMs are to sustain their role and legitimacy in contemporary society, surely they need to handle the challenges and opportunities represented by the rapid rise of digital media.[25] Two key issues can be outlined here: (i) expansion to multimedia to effectively deliver public service media content online across multiple platforms; and (ii) remodelled relationships with audiences, allowing for audience participation in and through the media, and prompt respon-

siveness to ever-changing audience needs and preferences.

The Government of Albania adopted the National Strategy on the Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting in 2012, according to which RTSH has a leading role in the digitalization process. As the Strategy outlines, "the public broadcaster – RTSH - creates, exploits and operates the national digital network based on the contract stipulated with AMA."[26] The digital switchover process was delayed and the first deadline of 17 June 2015 was not met, with detrimental consequences. This was due to legal challenges to the public broadcaster's tender and AMA's procedures to license private broadcasters. The construction of the two digital networks started in July 2015 and to date the total digital switchover has not yet been not completed.

Nonetheless, the process has enabled RTSH to invest substantially in digital technology for media production, management and broadcasting. RTSH now has an online presence through its official website, broadcasts in high definition as well, and some of its channels are also streamed online.[27] The strain in the RTSH digital presence is related in part to delays in updates of more than 24 hours, few followers on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts, and no possibility for user-generated content. Moreover, this expansion has not been carried out in synchrony with the Digital Switchover Strategy, and RTSH still lacks an integrated strategic plan for the digital area.[28] In 2015 the High State Control reported that RTSH had not developed the fundamental documents and processes for the digital era, such as: Strategy for the Management of Technological Transformation/Digitalisation 2015-2020; a working group for drafting the RTSH Development Strategy; an action plan regarding digitalisation phases; a corresponding

budget plan framework; and a marketing plan for digital switchover.[29] The basic approach has been one of ad hoc actions, approaching digitalisation merely as a technological upgrade. A positive step was taken in early 2017 with the initiation of the drafting of the RTSH Development Strategy.[30] This process needs to be open and transparent with proper consultations with the Council of Viewers and Listeners, regulatory bodies, the respective parliamentary committee, civil society, experts and the public at large.

In addition to its technology upgrade, RTSH has also introduced new channels and programmes. RTSH has increased its coverage of education, entertainment, sports and culture, and socio-economic and international affairs, rather than political and current affairs. RTSH is the only mainstream media that produces programmes for ethnic-national and linguistic minorities in Albania. However, the introduction of all the channels as envisaged in the Digital Switchover Strategy is not complete and the regulatory framework requires public consultations, which have not yet been completed.[31] Moreover no funds were spent on independent production in 2014 and 2015, but an open call for competition for independent production in science education was introduced at the beginning of 2017. This would allow for various groups to participate in RTSH media production and thus positively impact RTSH relations with audiences by helping to overcome low levels of social trust in RTSH.[32] Advancements in programming, both in quality and quantity, call for improvements in the processes of content production.

RTSH production, particularly news, is currently structured primarily around broadcasting, i.e. the format is suitable for television and radio. Its online news production is largely seen as separate, albeit with some degree of cooperation.

For instance, there is limited integration and internal coordination among the various media production departments at RTSH – the Department of Digital Programming was established in 2015, but its coordination and communication with the Department of Structural Programming and Current Affairs is ineffective.[33] The Department of WEB was introduced in late 2015 with a primary obligation to set up a suitable platform for online media and publish content in various formats - audio, text, photo, and video – provided by other departments. Currently the logistics of producing media content for multiple online media platforms are yet to be developed. Reporting to a hearing with Parliament, the Committee on Education and Mediums of Public Information, the RTSH Director General confirmed efforts towards reforming current media production practices and moving towards the incorporation of digital media working practices.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite noticeable progress, RTSH is adjusting its remit, operations and performance with a reluctant pace. One of the underlying factors might be that the speed of RTSH's transformation is slower than the changes in the landscape in which it operates and the publics it serves. Furthermore, its transformation is affected by contingency factors such as the political, economic and socio-cultural context in Albania. Although RTSH has lately carried out important organisational reforms – digitalisation, a new statute, editorial principles and code of ethics – it is clear that internal organisational barriers constrain RTSH's ability to seize the opportunities and tackle the challenges of the digital media.

RTSH should overcome current practices of perceiving digitalisation as merely a technological upgrade, and engage in a substantial reformative process encompassing its governance and operations, content production, human capital and overall performance and status in the Albanian media landscape and society. This transformation largely depends on the success of its expansion to online multimedia and the transformation of RTSH's relationship with audiences. Therefore, RTSH as PSM needs to re-position itself in a way that confirms its legitimacy and role in society, but at the same time reconnects with audiences.

This then leads to the personalization of services for a fragmented and complex society through diverse and quality programming and embracing media convergence – multimedia platforms, integrated news rooms, creativity and innovation in programming, media production and workflow. This strategy will then attract talent and contribute to quality programming and thus more audiences. The tasks are highly demanding and require substantial reforms of the RTSH organizational structure and culture in order to shift from traditional media production for broadcasting to innovative production processes for integrated multimedia platforms. Ultimately RTSH should become a learning media organization with the ability to set directions of change and innovation in the media market, by initiating or shaping media trends.

The value and relevance of RTSH in Albania needs to be discussed in a thorough public debate with the public interest at its centre. The legitimacy of RTSH needs to be confirmed in the digital era and RTSH needs to strengthen its profile as a representative of public interest. The concept of public interest as the underpinning principle of RTSH needs to be unpacked and mechanisms developed to put it centre stage in media policy and RTSH performance. This is interlinked to

the enhancement of the public interest in RTSH and more broadly in media integrity, freedom and independence as cornerstones of democratization. Furthermore, civil society, academia, and media associations should play a more proactive role in advocating for public interest in the media and in holding AMA, RTSH and relevant public bodies accountable.

Recommendations - Envisioning RTSH As A Public Service Media

Expanding to online multimedia

Recommendation 1 – Integration of newsroom provision

1.1 The newsroom provision should be integrated across platforms and channels drawing from the principle that news production should be story driven and not format driven so as to be suitable across platforms.
1.2 RTSH needs to develop integrated content management systems to manage media organisational processes (employee records, payrolls, expenditure, management of information and knowledge across the organisation and its partners); to store and manage content, programming and other media production assets; to streamline communication and coordination across departments.
1.3 RTSH archives should be digital and serve not only for historical and legacy purposes but also for Video on Demand and educative purposes and research.
1.4 Content for digital platforms should be made the first priority for all breaking news.
1.5 There should be constant evolution of programming, platforms and channels as the digital media changes rapidly with a clear focus on live, social, and mobile news.

1.6 Dedicated teams should be created to specifically develop new approaches and ideas for digital news and creative programming to cater for audiences' preferences.

Recommendation 2 – Approaches to mobile news and programming

It is necessary to keep up the pace with the developments of mobile web, which is growing very fast. Thus RTSH as PSM needs to adapt its digital news provision for mobile through the following:

2.1 The website needs to switch to responsive design to ensure it works across personal computers, tablets, and smartphones, with a cleaner design, faster load times, and a greater emphasis on video and audience input.
2.2 Similarly, a news app should be launched to include a broader range of content, to integrate more video, and offer more ways to discover content by supplementing the edited front page with 'most read' and 'most viewed' sections and the ability to follow topics and stories with the option of a personalized 'My News' section, achieving the balance between personalization, general news, and the occasional.

Remodelling relations with audiences

One of the challenges of RTSH is to connect with diverse publics in an ever-changing socio-cultural environment.

Recommendations 3 – Participation in and through the media

3.1 Enhancement of the role of the Council of Viewers and Listeners through a more inclusive approach to member selection, regular meetings and the publication of reports, in order to hold RTSH accountable to the public.

3.2 Participation in programming – for example for marginalised communities and/or ethnic minorities through increased independent production with open and fair competition.

3.3 Development of a roadmap and detailed guidelines on how to incorporate user generated content.

Recommendation 4 – A commitment to quality journalism and media integrity

4.1 Increased accountability of RTSH to the public through transparency of the financial management of funds and the publication of decisions made by governing bodies.

4.2 Elimination of the practices of employment of staff by political affiliation and interference in order to improve the quality and integrity of human resources at RTSH.

4.3 Establishment and improvement of self-regulating mechanisms and self-organization bodies.

Recommendation 5 – Approaches to social media distribution

5.1 Develop a strategy / roadmap on how to approach social media distribution and think about their relations with the increasingly important digital intermediaries such as search engines, video-hosting sites, messaging apps, and – when it comes to news, perhaps most importantly – social media sites.

5.2 Maximise public service reach and diverse audiences through social media, but balance it with the principles and remit of RTSH - potential risks in the tension between the public service obligation to provide information across the full range of relevant issues and the ways in which social media operate in practice.

5.3 Ensure that users who encounter RTSH content on social media platforms recognize the brand and credit RTSH for the content they use.

1   Radio Televizioni Shqiptar – RTSH.

2   The European Union, European Broadcasting Union, Organisation for Security and Cooperation, various Embassies and other funders have supported the transformation of RTSH with financial resources and capacity building. See Ilda Londo, *Limited Assistance for Limited Impact: International Media Assistance in Albania Regional* (Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research, 2013).

3   Jeanette Steemers, "Public Service Is Not Dead Yet: Strategies In the 21st Century", in *Broadcasting and Convergence: New Articulations of the Public Service Remit*, eds. Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Taisto Hujanen (Goteborg: Nordicom, 2008). Johannes Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens, "Public Service Broadcasting in Converging Media Modalities: Practices and Reflections from the Netherlands", *The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 14, no. 3 (2008), pp. 351-360.

4   Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), "The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy: Policy Paper", (BiEPAG, 2017) http://www.biepag.eu/publications/the-crisis-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-authoritarianism-and-eu-stabilitocracy/ (Accessed on April 28, 2017).

5   Ilda Londo, "Albania", in *Media Integrity Matters: Reclaiming Public Service Values in Media and Journalism*, ed. Brankica Petković

(Ljubljana: Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies, 2014), pp. 51–119.

6 Paolo Mancini and Jan Zielonka, "Introduction – Structure and Performance of the News Media in Central and Eastern Europe", *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 4 (2012), pp. 379–387.

7 Ilda Londo, *Mapping the Digital Media: Albania Country Report* (London: Open Society Foundations, 2012).

8 The Government of Albania adopted the National Strategy on the Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting in 2012.

9 "Ligj Nr. 97/2013, datë 4.3.2013, për mediat audiovizive në republikën e shqipërisë" [The Law no. 97/2013 on Audio-visual Media in the Republic of Albania], *Official Gazette* 37/13.

10 Also see Ilda Londo, "Monitoring EU Guidelines in Albania: Regulator and PSB Exposed to Political Power Relations", Media Integrity Matters, 2015 Monitoring Reports (SEE Media Observatory, 2015). http://mediaobservatory. net/sites/default/files/Albania_Regulator%20 and%20PSB%20exposed%20to%20polit- ical%20power%20relations.pdf (Accessed on August 7, 2016).

11 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Election Observation Mission, Interim Report: 15 May – 1 June 2015 (Tirana: OSCE, June 4, 2015).

12 "Law no. 97/2013 on Audio-visual Media in the Republic of Albania", *Official Gazette* 37/13.

13 "Albania Public Service Broadcaster Radio Televizioni Shqiptar Elects New Director General", *EBU News*, May 6, 2016.

14 Data from in-depth interviews with RTSH media professionals and media experts, Tirana, May 2015.

15 Londo, *Limited Assistance for Limited Impact*.

16 High State Control, *Report on the Performance of Albanian Radio and Television 2014-2015: Audit Performance Report* (Tirana: High State Control, Department of Performance Auditing, 2015).

17 Parliamentary Committee on Education and Mediums of Public Information, Auditim performance: Performanca e Radio-Tele-vizionit Shqiptar, Projekti i digjitalizimit [Evalu-ation of the RTSH Operations for 2016: Annual Report] (Tirana: The Parliament of the Republic of Albania, April 2017). http://www.klsh.org. al/web/performanca_e_radio_televizionit_ shqiptar_1485.pdf (Accessed on August 17, 2017).

18 High State Control, *Report on the Performance of Albanian Radio and Television 2014-2015.*

19 The overall Strategy on Digital Switchover as well as the new law on media, adopted in 2013, confirm the current funding model.

20 As demonstrated by the research conducted in Albania in the framework of the regional research project: "The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in the Western Balkans". For more see: Davor Marko, "The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in the Western Balkans: The Need for a New Para-digm", August 9, 2016. http://www.analitika. ba/en/publications/buducnost-javnih-servisa- na-zapadnom-balkanu-u-potrazi-za-novom- paradigmom (Accessed on August 9, 2016).

21 Ibid. See also Londo, "Monitoring EU Guidelines in Albania".

22 High State Control, *Report on the Performance of the Albanian Radio and Television 2014-2015*.

23 Ibid.

24 Parliamentary Committee on Education and Mediums of Public Information, Evaluation of RTSH Operations for 2016.

25 Annika Sehl, Alessio Cornia and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Public Service News and Digital Media* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016), http://reutersinstitute. politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Public%20 Service%20News%20and%20Digital%20 Media.pdf (Accessed on April 28, 2017).

26 For more on the current process, see the report of ITU: Loreta Andoni, "Digital Switchover in Albania" (presentation presented at Regional Seminar for Europe and CIS on Spectrum Management and Transition to Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcasting, Bucharest, March 21-23, 2016).

27 Since 2012 RTSH has started to build an infrastructure of digital transitions, a programme packet with 4 channels such as RTSH HD, RTSH Sport, RTSH Music and RTSH Art in Standard Definition format, SD. RTSH is now investing in new studios and employing new staff.

28   Mirela Oktrova, "Media e Shërbimit Publik (MShP) dhe sfida e dyfishtë e digjitalizimit" [The Two-Fold Challenges of the Digital Process of the Public Service Broadcasting Service in Albania], Albanian Media Institute, 2015. http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/M.Oktrova%20shqip%20follow-up.pdf (Accessed on August 18, 2017).

29   High State Control, *Report on the Performance of Albanian Radio and Television 2014-2015.*

30   Parliamentary Committee on Education and Mediums of Public Information, Evaluation of the RTSH Operations for 2016.

31   As per the Strategy, RTSH should have 12 channels, such as RTSH 2, RTSH Parliament, RTSH Special Topics, RTSH Diversity, RTSH History, RTSH Children, and RTSH Film – not yet fully operative.

32   See Adela Halo, Dorarta Hyseni, Doran Matlija and Theodoros Alexandridis, *A Blind Eye On the News: Self-censorship in the Albanian Media* (Tirana: Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2015).

33   High State Control, *Report on the Performance of Albanian Radio and Television 2014-2015.*

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