

Pilot Project

Censorship of the Albanian media from the Facebook Platform in 2021

Projekt pilot
**Problemet me Rregullimin
Etik të mediave shqiptare
nga platforma Facebook
2021**



This research was produced as a part of the UNESCO EU-funded project “Building Trust in Media in South East Europe and Turkey – Phase 2.”



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A research from the Albanian Media Council.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has brought major changes and challenges to the information ecosystem in Albania, as well as globally. The online world is broadly accessible and widely used among the country's population. In a country with just 2.83 million peopleⁱ, only in the third trimester of 2022, Albania counted 2.66 million Internet users, of which 2.19 million connected online through smartphonesⁱⁱ.

The number of actors and communication and information platforms available in the country has multiplied. The ways of producing, consuming, and disseminating information have also changed. In addition to traditional media, social media are also playing an increasing role in the process of informing the public. On the other side, traditional media use social media platforms as new channels of connecting with the audience and delivering content.

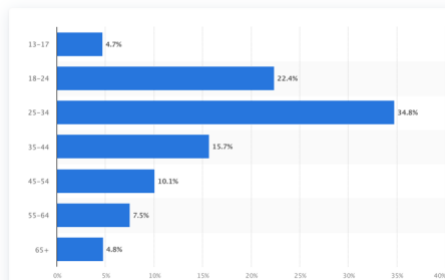


As for the new media, they are already an integral part of the distribution of the content. The number of informative websites in Albanian is often said to be between 600 – 800. However, the exact number cannot be verified because most use domains like .com, .net, and .org, on which no comprehensive data is available. Using the Alexa algorithms, the Albanian Media Council verified that among the top 300 most visited websites in Albania, less than 30 of them were news portals.

Nonetheless, since the attitude of the different consumer groups varies among the media, that is still not a valid point of reference. Members of the Alliance for Ethical Media have reported that their readers represent a mix of website visitors and social media users. Yet, most of them reported growing numbers of readers on social media platforms, mainly Facebook, sometimes surpassing those coming directly through the website. Although many news portals are building a consistent reach on Instagram, most of the users seem to come from Facebook, with Twitter lagging behind by a wide margin.

The most prominent social media platform in Albania is Facebook. As of February 2022, Facebook had 92.19% of the share in the Albanian marketⁱⁱⁱ.

Distribution of Facebook users in Albania as of July 2021



By July 2021, Albania counted 1,784,000 Facebook users in the country, of which 34.8% were of ages 25-34 years old, 22.4% were of age 18-24 years old, 15.7% were of age 35-44 years old, and 10.1% were of age 45-55 years old^{iv}.

Despite such engagement, Facebook does not have an office in Albania. Information obtained by BIRN journalists indicate that no more than 2 Albanian-speaking staff members are engaged with content supervision in the Facebook offices. Alternative reports put this number at 0.

This situation has created a communication vacuum between the media and the social media platform. We have received various concerns from media editors about how the platform acts towards their publications, blocking distribution, blocking access, or even bringing down websites for a period of time.

Therefore we decided to try and have a better insight on the issue through this specific short pilot. Notably, we would like to understand what kind of articles are removed or blocked by Facebook; what type of action does Facebook take in these cases; which media is targeted and what are the justifications for that.

METHODOLOGY

The pilot aimed at gathering 2 streams of data regarding: 1) the intensity of Facebook posting by the observed media and the public engagements on the posts (which was done during 4 weeks); 2) the types of actions undertaken by Facebook to regulate ethical issues related to the posts of the involved media.

The second part proved to be much more complicated. The only of extracting and documenting the needed information was to ask the media to report their individual cases based on self-declaration, a process that went on for 7 weeks.

Newspapers: Gazetadita.al
Sot.com.al

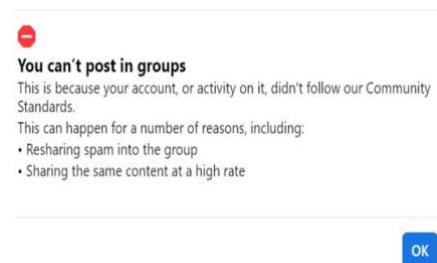
Tv station: Mcentv.al
Abcnews.al

New media:
zgjohushqiptar.info
albeu.com
noa.al
shkodraweb.com
joq-albania.com
albaniadailynews.com
amfora.al
DurrësiPress
citizens-channel.com
opinion.al
gogo.al
gazeta-shqip.al
droni.al
boldnews.al
dosja.al

The data were collected and verified by completing the following information:

- The name of the media and their name on Facebook;
- a link to the specific article;
- the title, the author, and the category the article falls in (op-ed, chronicle, current affairs, politics, photo, report, video report, investigative report, world news);
- the date of publication and the date of action by Facebook;
- the type of action by FACEBOOK (deleting the article, blocking the page, blocking the share, blocking the sponsorship);
- the reason given by FACEBOOK for the specific action.

Screenshots were requested to document visually Facebook's actions and the level of communication achieved with the platform regarding specific issues. Finally, the AMC made its ethical assessment of the article.



Due to the complicity of the issue and the need for reliability, we called upon the media of the Alliance for Ethical Media to be part of the project.



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Add to your post



Post

We limit how often you can post, comment or do other things in a given amount of time in order to help protect the community from spam. You can try again later. [Learn More](#)

If you think this doesn't go against our Community Standards let us know.

CENSORSHIP FROM FACEBOOK TOWARDS ALBANIAN MEDIA

The intensity of posting on Facebook

The first part of our study was done by continuously monitoring the activity on Facebook from the selected media.

Their daily publications and activity on Facebook during the monitored period are shown in *Table 1*.

MEDIA	Average Daily FB posts	Average Daily local news	Avg. Daily international news	Average Daily FB comments
mcntv.al	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
abcnews.al	101.6	73.2	28.4	1267.6
Gazetadita.al	47.4	31	16.4	45.4
sot.com.al	161.6	130.8	30.8	27
zgjohushqiptar.info,	133	111.2	21.8	236.6
albeu.com,	59.8	49.2	10.6	95.8
noa.al,	86	60.8	25.2	115
shkodraweb.com,	19	16.6	2.4	60.4
joq-albania.com,	51.6	34.6	17	1906.6
albaniadailynews.com,	28	24.8	3.2	0.2
amfora.al	0.4	0.4	0	0.4
DurrësiPress,	84.4	62	22.4	157.8
citizens-channel.com,	1.8	1.8	0	36.4
opinion.al,	59.4	46.6	12.8	2265.8
gogo.al,	57.2	38.2	19	13.8
gazeta-shqip.al,	95	66	29	171.6
droni.al,	16.2	16	0.2	3.2
boldnews.al,	60.8	56.2	4.6	203.6
dosja.al	61.6	51.6	10	290.2

Table 1

The types of actions undertaken by Facebook against the posting of the involved media

During the 6 weeks of the data-gathering, 11 of the participating media did not report cases during 2021. Eight of the involved media reported 27 cases which were documented with the complete data. The media reported over 50 other cases that either they didn't keep track of or couldn't be documented (verified).

19 media
8 media had articles regulated by FB
27 cases in 2021
50+ undocumented cases

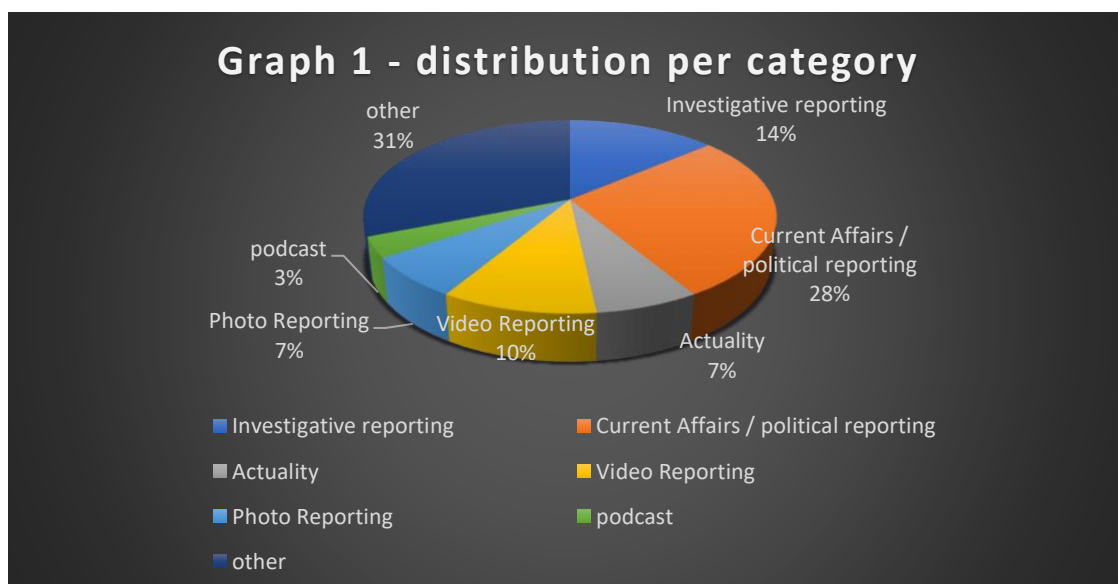
AMC went through a case-by-case verification of these documented cases, and

2 unethical articles
1 violation of copyright
2 articles promoting conspiracy
22 articles comply with the ethical standards of the Code of Ethics of the Albanian Journalist

we found out that two (2) of them are unethical articles, both reporting excessive violence. Another (1) article had violated the international copyright issues by publishing without permission (although with hyperlink) a reporting from an international media outlet.

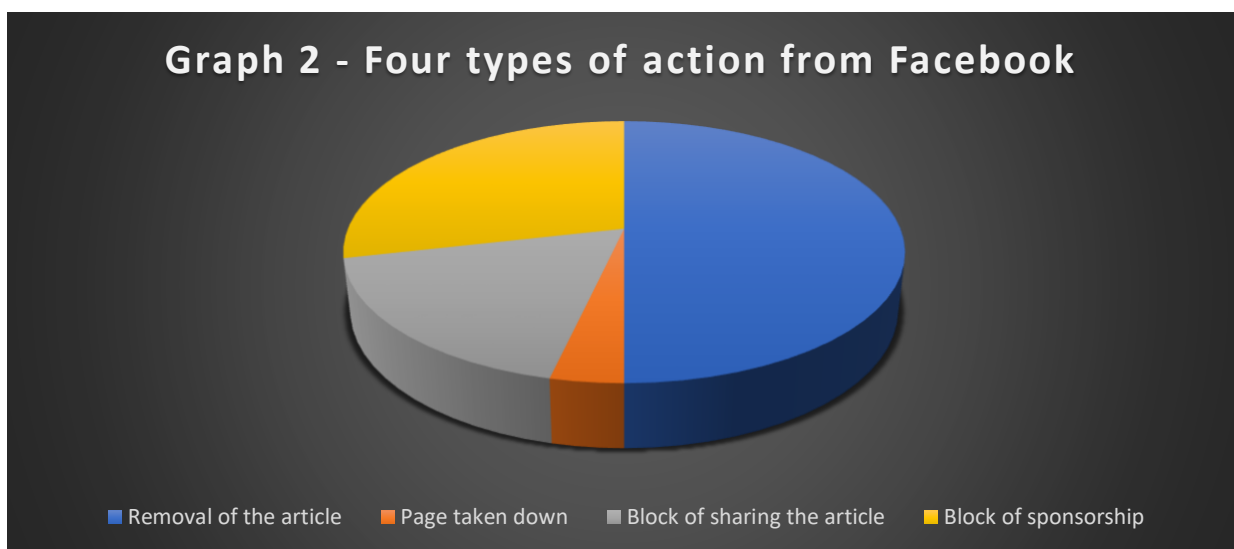
Two (2) of the articles were found to promote conspiracy theories. The remaining (22) articles were found to be in compliance with the Code of Ethics of the Albanian Journalist (updated, 2018)^v.

The division of blocked materials by categories is given in Graph 1.



Regardless of the categories, with the exception of international news and chronicles, all the articles had to some extent critical content towards the Government, ministries, the Municipality of Tirana or have exposed problems related to them.

Facebook has acted in 4 ways regarding the articles under review:



1. By removing the material,
2. By taking down the Facebook page,
3. By restricting the sharing,
4. By restricting the sponsorship of the article.

In two (2) cases, the research found out that Facebook revoked the right for the entire media to boost content for six months or over. In one (1) case, Facebook blocked the page for at least one week. The actions of Facebook are shown in Graph 2.

In some of the cases, especially when an explanation for the action is given, the automatic reasons for the action, according to Facebook, were, as shown in Table 2.

In 6 cases	From the same media, “Your posts go against our standards on spam”
In 3 cases	From the same media “Ad Can’t Run: Create a Disclaimer for This Page”
In 1 case	“Content removed for violating out standards on Hate Speech”
In 1 case	“Content removed for violating out standards on Intellectual Property”
In 1 case	“Content removed for violating out standards on Graphic Violence”
In 4 cases	from the same media “Your ad may have been rejected because it mentions politicians or is about sensitive social issues that could influence public opinion, how people vote and may impact the outcome of an election or pending legislation. Our policy for running ads about social issue, electoral or politics requires you to get authorized first by confirming your identity and creating a disclaimer that lists who is paying for the ads”
In 3 cases	from the same media - “Ad Can’t Run: Edit, Ad or Confirm Identity”
In 4 cases	from the same media - “You Can’t Post in Groups”
In 1 case	“Violating Community Standarts”
In 1 case	(editorial) “Your Message couldn’t be sent because it includes content that other people on FACEBOOK have reported as abusive”

Table 2

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot helped to create the base of understand how the Facebook is censoring the Albanian media.

Observing the data, we may understand that the number of removed or blocked articles in a year is low comparing to the high number of articles published daily. But, the problem is not quantitative but qualitative. The articles removed or blocked are often of a higher importance to the public then the rest of the daily routine reporting.

We can see that the number of op-eds removed is quite high as is the number of investigations. This amounts to pure censorship.

We see that Facebook uses the same (automatic) argument when blocking different articles of a specific media. This happens in 100% of the cases. This is a concerning feature. It seems that Facebook is not acting based on the content of an individual article.

Page quality

Page is at risk of being unpublished

JOO News

Page restrictions



Your Page is at risk of being unpublished, and has reduced distribution and other restrictions, due to continued Community Standards violations.



This Page isn't being suggested to people at this time

Violations



DECISION MADE
Content removed for violating our Community Standards.
Notified 17 February 2022

The fact that more than 4/5 of the total blocked/removed articles are ethical raises another concern: Facebook is acting without fully understanding the content it is blocking/removing.

Besides, Facebook is blocking republished investigations or op-eds at least in 5 cases, and none of those is removed for copyright violation.

The motivation behind Facebook actions is not clear. The automatic explanation it sends to the media does not make sense in most of the cases. We have only one case, an op-ed, where Facebook specified that it was reported as “abusive”. AMC found no signs of abusive content in the article in question.

RECOMMENDATIONS

More data is needed to have a proper panorama of the situation. More media need to report to the database. The pilot must have a follow up. A communication channel with Facebook needs to be built to address these issues.



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ⁱ Data provided by INSTAT (<http://www.instat.gov.al/en/statistical-literacy/the-population-of-albania/>)

ⁱⁱ Data provided by AKEP – the Albanian Authority of electronic Communications

ⁱⁱⁱ Data provided by Global Stats

^{iv} Data provided by Statista.com

^v The Code of Ethics of the Albanian Journalist (<https://kshm.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Kodi-i-Etikes-final-English-4.pdf>)