Study on the Facebook's restrictions of some Albanian media content, 2022

Supported by UNESCO

Through 'BUILDING TRUST IN MEDIA IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE AND TURKEY'

Prepared by:
Albanian Media Council

25 October 2022

Disclaimer:

For further information please contact:

This study is prepared with the support from UNESCO.

Albanian Media Council
info@kshm.al

The views and opinions presented herein are those of the authors and should not be taken as to reflect the official position of the European Union and/or the Unesco.

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Internet has brought important changes in the Albanian information ecosystem. Only in the third trimester of 2021, Albania counted 2.66 million internet users, of which 2.19 million through cell phone broadband[i] in a country where the population is just 2.83 million people[ii].

The number of actors and information and communication platforms in the country has multiplied in the last decade. The ways of producing, consuming and disseminating information have also changed. In addition to traditional media, the new media and the social media is also playing an increasing role in the process of informing the public.

Traditional media is using social platforms as new channels of connecting with the audience and delivering content. As for the *new media*, they are already an integral part of distribution of the content. The number of informative websites in Albanian is often said to to be between 600 – 800, although the figure cannot be verified because most of them use domains .com, .net, .org on which exist no comprehensive information.

The Albanian Media Council using the Alexa algorithm, verified that among the top 300 most visited websites in Albania less than 30 of them were news portals (2020). Nonetheless, since the attitude of the different groups of consumers varies for different media, that is still not a valid point of reference. Members of the Alliance for Ethical Media have reported that their readers are a mix of webpage visitors and social media users. Yet, most of them reported to us growing numbers of readers on social platforms, mainly Facebook, sometimes surpassing those in the website. Although many news portals are building a consistent reach in Instagram, most of the users seem to come from Facebook, with twitter lagging behind by a wide margin, at 3.9%[iii].

Based on user data, the biggest social media platform in Albania is Facebook. Data published in Meta's advertising resources indicates that Facebook had 1.20 million users in Albania in early 2022[iv].

However, Facebook restricts the use of its platform to people aged 13 and above, so it's also worth highlighting that 49.1 percent of the "eligible" audience in Albania was using Facebook in the first trimester of 2022[v]. Based on the same set of data, at the start of 2022, 37.9 percent of Facebook's ad audience in Albania was female, while 62.1 percent was male.

Despite such engagement, META does not have an office or any other representation in Albania. Information obtained by BIRN journalists reports that no more than 2 Albanian speaking personnel are engaged with content supervision in the META offices. Alternative reports put this number at 0. This situation has created a vacuum of communication between the media and the platform.

The study was initiated based on anectodal information that Facebook was restricting mostly content of media critical of the government and its policies. We continue to receive various concerns from media editors for the way the platform acts towards their publications, blocking distribution, blocking access or even bringing down websites for a period of time. So the study tries to take a closer look at the type of content Facebook is restricting in Albania.

2   THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study built on a previous pilot done by AMC monitoring the Facebook blocking contents of Albanian Media during 2021. The year it was done was an election year, meaning that the public discourse was more aggressive than usual prompting to more interaction by Facebook algorithms.

The first trimester of 2022, in comparison, was characterized by a heated political discussion within the opposition and a less aggressive campaign of a partial local election. The second trimester of 2022 when the study did take place did not feature heated political discourse. The third trimester was not possible to be taken into account.

3   METHODOLOGY

The pilot study aimed at gathering data in 2 directions:

1) The intensity of publications on Facebook of the media observed and the eventual engagement of the public, which was done during a period of 2 weeks;

2) The kind of actions Facebook undertakes in order to regulate ethical issues related to the publications of these media. Due to privacy restrictions, the only way we were able to gather the information we needed was by asking media to self-report their individual cases on the basis of self-declaration.

Based on a previous pilot, we asked 9 media that had previously reported problems with Facebook restricting content.

The media were asked to complete the following information:

The name of the media and their name on FACEBOOK; links 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*); as well as the reason given by FACEBOOK for the specific action. Screenshots were requested for the FACEBOOK's actions and the level of communication achieved with the platform regarding that specific issue. Finally, the AMC made its own ethical assessment of the article.

This self-declaration process was built on the agreement that the concrete names and cases would be kept confidential in the study.

unesco

We agreed that all the cases must be of the first second, and third trimester of 2022. We could get the info for the first and second trimester, but not for the third trimester. The reason is that from July 2022 Facebook decided to enter in collaboration with the fact-checking organisation, Faktoje.al to fakt check the complaints sent to the platform.

4   OBSERVATIONS

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

Their daily publications during the monitored period is shown in *Table 1*.

During the period of the data-gathering, 4 of the participating media did not report cases during the period in question. 5 of them reported 9 cases which were documented with the complete data.

AMC went through a case by case verification of these cases[vi] and we found out that one (1) of them had violated the international copyright issues by publishing without permission (*although with hyperlink*) a report by an international media. The remaining (8) articles were found to comply with the Albanian Journalist Code of Ethics (updated, 2018).

Nonetheless, the period of gathering of data was quite short; and adding to the lack of personnel from the media participating in the study, we believe the reporting turnover was lower then the cases that exist in reality.

The move from Facebook to collaborate with Faktoje meant that the premises for this study, to check how algorithms of Facebook censor the Albanian media, fell of.

Fact-checking the fact-checking process by Faktoje would require other methodology, means, and manpower. So, we could only produce information for the first and second trimester of 2022.

5   DIVISION BY CATEGORY

The division of blocked materials (reviewed as ethical by AMC), by category is given in Graph 1.

Graph 1 - distribution per category
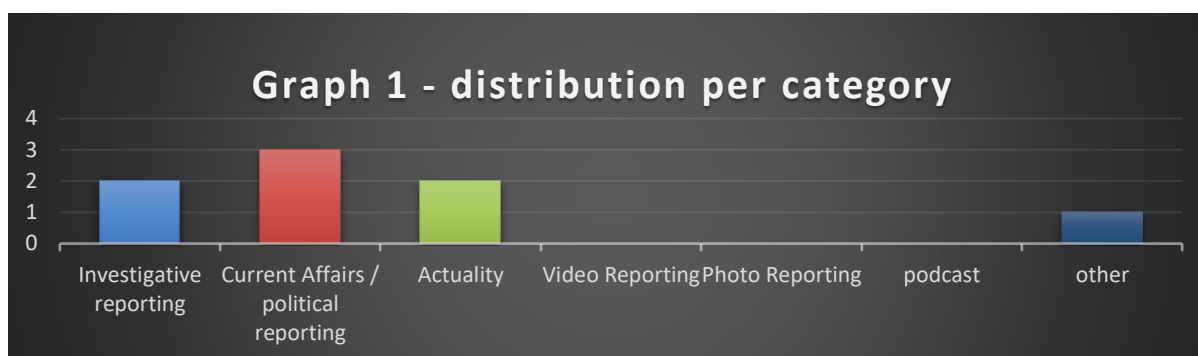
Regardless of the categories, all articles had in common is critical content towards the Government, ministries, the Municipality of Tirana or have exposed problems related to them. One of them had content related to the political fight within the opposition.

6 INTERVENTION BY FACEBOOK

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

By removing the material, or by restricting the sharing or the sponsorship of the article.

We found out that in one (1) case Facebook revoked the right to boost for the media for an unspecified period.

In the reviewed cases, Facebook's automatic explanation for their action is explained with the arguments:

In 2 cases - from the same media "Your posts go against our standards on spam"

In 2 cases - from the same media "Ad Can't Run: Create a Disclaimer for This Page"

In 1 case - "Content removed for violating our standards on Hate Speech"

In 1 case - "Content removed for violating our standards on Intellectual Property"

In 1 case - "You Can't Post in Groups"

In 1 case - "Violating Community Standards"

We were told by the media that except when blocking the sponsorship of the articles, meaning only when an economic transaction was present, Facebook did not otherwise engage in communication neither did they respond when contacted.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The project further helped to understand how Facebook is censoring the Albanian media.

First conclusion is that in 92% of the cases, Facebook is striking articles that are deemed by AMC to not breach the Ethical Code of the Albanian journalists. In all the cases, the justification given by Facebook did not make any sense when examining specific articles.

Observing the data, we may understand that the number of removed or blocked articles in the period under revision is low compared to the high number of articles published daily. However, 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.

The number of the strikes seems also low compared to the previous study, (27 in 2021). This is because the period under review in this project is shorter (6 months) but also because of the lower level of the politial debate during this period if compared to the election year like 2021.

We can see that the number of investigations is significative compared to the total.

Facebook is sending same justifications for action on different types of content to media in at least 2 (verified) cases. This is not too much to facilitate the understanding, but considering the data from the 2021 pilot study, … unfinished sentence?

Besides, Facebook is blocking republished investigations or op-eds at least in 1 case, and none of those is removed for copyright violation. Such actions are of concern for freedom of expression and the media in Albania.

8   RECOMMENDATIONS

More data is needed to have a proper insight of the situation and answer the question whether Facebook is censorsing Albanian critical media, even with the involvement of fakt-checking services.

Fakt-checking as it is cannot solve ethical issues, just facts.

When discussing self-regulation of Facebook in regard to media ethics, Press Councils should be part of the solution.

A communication channel with Facebook needs to be built to address these issues and the best way would be through a joint effort with other regional and European actors.

i Data provioded by AKEP – the Albanian Authority of electronic Communications

ii Data provioded by INSTAT (http://www.instat.gov.al/en/statistical-literacy/the-population-of-albania)

iii As reported by https://datareportal.com

iv As reported by https://datareportal.com

v Data provided by https://datareportal.com

vi By the standards of the Ethical Code of Albanian Journalists (https://kshm.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Kodi-i-Etikes-final-English-4.pdf)