



Démasquer la propagande pour saisir les idéologies
Unmask propaganda to grasp ideologies
Desenmascarar la propaganda para captar las ideologías

Propaganda: the challenges faced by journalists to protect media freedom in Albania

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La propagande a pris les médias albanais en otage et les a transformés en vassaux, qui servent leur propre agenda politique en convainquant les masses par la diffusion unilatérale d'informations. Cela entraîne une insécurité pour les journalistes libres et indépendants. Citizen Channel, un média indépendant et non lucratif, a ainsi été victime d'une cyberattaque en avril 2024. Le pays est aussi confronté à une faible littératie médiatique, en particulier chez les personnes d'un certain âge. Cette étude vise à identifier l'impact idéologique de la propagande soutenue par l'État sur les médias albanais, les défis auxquels sont confrontés les journalistes et la maîtrise des médias par le public et sa volonté de vérifier les faits. Pour atteindre cet objectif, des méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives ont été utilisées en surveillant quatre médias nationaux ainsi qu'en utilisant des questionnaires comme instrument de mesure pour les journalistes.

Mots-clés : propagande, public, journalistes, éducation aux médias, vérification des faits.

Propaganda has enmeshed the media in Albania. It has tuned it into a vassal that serves to convey a certain political agenda by convincing the masses through this unilateral conveyance of information. This brings about insecurity for free and independent journalists. For example, Citizen Channel, a nonprofit and independent media outlet, suffered a cyberattack in April 2024. At the same time, there is an inadequate approach to media education for Albanian citizens, especially the middle aged and the elderly. This study aims to identify the ideological impact of state-sponsored propaganda on the Albanian media, the challenges for journalists, and the audience's media literacy and willingness to engage in fact-checking. To achieve this goal, qualitative and quantitative methods were used by monitoring four national media outlets, as well as using questionnaires as a measuring instrument for journalists.

Keywords: propaganda, audience, journalists, media literacy, fact-checking.

La propaganda ha tomado a los medios de comunicación albaneses como rehenes y los ha convertido en vasallos, que sirven su propia agenda política convenciendo a las masas mediante la difusión unilateral de información. Esto crea inseguridad para los periodistas libres e independientes. Citizen Channel, un medio independiente y sin fines de lucro, fue víctima de un ciberataque en abril de 2024. El país también se enfrenta a un bajo nivel de alfabetización mediática. Este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar el impacto ideológico de la propaganda apoyada por el estado en los medios de comunicación albaneses, los desafíos que enfrentan los periodistas y el dominio público de los medios de comunicación y su voluntad de verificar los hechos. Para lograr este objetivo, se utilizaron métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos mediante la vigilancia de cuatro medios de comunicación nacionales y el uso de cuestionarios como instrumento de medición para los periodistas.

Palabras clave : propaganda, público, periodistas, educación mediática, verificación de los hechos.

Introduction

The multifaceted nature of state-orchestrated propaganda in Albania, aggravated by the intertwining of state and commercial pressures creates a challenging environment for journalists. Maintaining independence and integrity in such a context requires not only resilience but also a collective commitment to an ethical journalism that questions the omnipresent influence of state-sponsored propaganda through various media forms. The use of propaganda in Albania has evolved in the context of a socio-political landscape marked by a transition from a single party system to a more liberalized but contested democratic environment. Gjelhoshaj and Alhasani (2024) provide an in-depth analysis of contemporary propaganda methods used by the Albanian government, illustrating how these strategies are designed to shape public opinion and strengthen political agendas. A main avenue through which propaganda manifests itself is the state-controlled media, because the government exerts a significant influence on print and electronic media. This influence often results in a narrative framework that aligns with the objectives of the ruling party, effectively drowning out dissident voices and alternative points of view.

These authors classify propaganda methods into three global strategies: information control, manipulation of media accounts and mobilization of social media platforms. The control of information is carried out by means of legislative actions aimed at regulating the ownership and operation of the media, creating an environment where independent media sources struggle to gain a foothold. For example, the legal framework surrounding journalism provides significant room for maneuver for the government's intervention in cases deemed "in the public interest", a term which has been increasingly exploited to justify censorship of critical commentary.

The manipulation of media accounts often occurs through the strategic dissemination of news sponsored by the State, which emphasizes the achievements of the ruling party while minimizing unfavorable coverage. This selective reporting creates an environment where the population is constantly bombarded with messages that strengthen government agendas. Gjelhoshaj and Alhasani (2024) note that a widespread tactic involves the promotion of "success stories" linked to economic growth and national stability, which, although potentially verifiable, eclipses pressing problems such as corruption, unemployment, and human rights violations.

Simultaneously, social media platforms have become critical arenas for the dissemination of government propaganda. The Albanian government has capitalized on digital technology to reach wider audiences, deploying targeted campaigns that engage users in stories that align themselves with government interests. This tactic often includes the use of bots and false profiles to amplify stories while silencing opposition points of view. Gjelhoshaj and Alhasani (2024) illustrate how this strategy facilitates the creation of echo chambers, in which users are mainly exposed to the content that reflects their preexisting beliefs, thus limiting exposure to opposing opinions. Furthermore, Çupi (2022) offers the following conclusion: "Political communication today is essentially not about conveying meaningful and valuable political messages to the public, or messages that contain valuable information, but aims to build the political image of institutions and politicians. In this view, style is more important than the essence, which will easily influence the mass public, who are also their potential voters".

The influence of state propaganda on the Albanian media

The role of the media in the formation of public perceptions is an essential part of our research, particularly where the dissemination of information is deeply intermingled with cultural and political factors. In Albania, as in many other ex-communist states, the media landscape has become a complex area through which public opinion is molded. Television, as a dominant medium, has played a fundamental role in this process, and specifically, one cannot exaggerate the influence of Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus. These TV channels (which we have monitored during a period of 6 months, from May until October 2024) have become key players, using several propaganda techniques to shape the perceptions and ideological preferences of the Albanian audience. But before outlining these techniques, we will start with a presentation of each of the monitored TV channels.

Founded in 2001, Top Channel quickly positioned itself at the forefront of the media panorama, exercising a significant influence on the spread of news and the formation of public opinion. At the center of this analysis is the editorial policy of the network, which reflects a multifaceted commitment to propaganda aimed at modeling the perceptions of the public in line with wider political and social narratives. The editorial choices made by Top Channel often align with the interests of the dominant political groups, thus promoting an environment favorable to propaganda. For example, Luku (2017) highlights how the network coverage during electoral periods has a marked tendency to encourage certain actors or political parties. This phenomenon is highlighted by the disproportionate transmission time assigned to pro-government narratives, while dissenting voices are relegated to the margins. These editorial decisions not only contribute to the strengthening of existing ideological leanings, but also play a crucial role in modeling public perceptions of political legitimacy and authority.

In addition, the frame of Top Channel news exemplifies its role in propaganda practices. The selection of language, the representation of political events and the choice of interview topics are meticulously chosen to evoke specific emotional responses from the public. For example, during the coverage of national crises, Top Channel often underlines unity and resilience, aligning itself with nationalist themes prevalent in the Albanian ideological discourse. Through the strategic narrative, the network not only informs, but also mobilizes public sentiment, facilitating compliance with the prevalent political narratives.

Klan TV, founded at the end of the 1990s, has been influential in the establishment of a framework for entertainment and the transmission of news that resonates with Albanian viewers. What distinguishes Klan TV is its strategic incorporation of sensationalism and emotionally loaded narratives with political themes. This channel has frequently used techniques such as news dramatization, the selective framing and the use of high-profile personalities to involve its viewers. These methods serve not only to attract the public but also to legitimize certain political views, thus shaping public discourse. The editorial options and presentation styles of Klan TV reveal broader ideological inclinations, reflecting and reinforcing specific narratives that are aligned with the interests of their property.

On the other hand, Syri TV, which was launched in 2017, presents a markedly different approach. Positioned as an independent alternative to established networks, the channel claims to offer objective journalism and a platform for dissident voices. However, a closer analysis indicates that it also uses propaganda techniques that serve specific political agendas. Using selective

reports, emotional appeals, and strategic associations with political figures, Syri TV has created a narrative that positions itself as a defender of transparency and responsibility. This positioning not only influences public perceptions of political processes, but also infuses a sense of partisanship among its audience, which can lead to polarized perspectives on critical issues.

Vizion Plus, established in the early 2000s, adds another layer to the Albanian media complex. The channel has gained notoriety for its entertainment programming together with the news content, which blurs the lines between information and entertainment. This combination often involves the use of sensational elements, taking advantage of the public interest in the culture of celebrities and entertainment news to capture its audience while addressing relevant socio-political issues. The double approach involving entertainment and news allows Vizion Plus to reach a broader demographic group, thus reinforcing public perceptions rooted in popular culture instead of in consistent and objective political analysis. This approach has sociocultural implications, as it both reflects and influences the values and aspirations of the Albanian population.

The convergence of Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus illustrates the multifaceted media landscape in Albania, where each channel not only competes for the attention of the audience, but also acts as a vehicle for political and social messaging. Through sophisticated propaganda techniques, which extend from framing, emotional appeals, exaggeration to use of narratives that resonate with cultural feelings, these networks actively shape public perceptions and contribute to the socio-political fabric of the Albanian society. This interaction between the media, public perception and political ideology requires a critical examination of the influences mediated by these prominent television channels. Their operations and the subtle narratives they propagate shed light on the broader implications for democracy, civil society and human rights within the Albanian context. Television networks serve as powerful vehicles to disseminate information, and their influence extends beyond mere entertainment. They shape public perceptions, reinforce social norms, and generate political discourse. Among these networks, Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus play a prominent role in the Albanian media scene. The effectiveness of these stations in the influence of public opinion can be attributed mainly to the use of various propaganda techniques. These techniques not only reinforce their narratives, but also cultivate emotional resonance with their audience (Gogo, 2024).

One of the most powerful advertising techniques used by these networks is the appeal to emotion. Klan TV, for example, usually creates stories that cause strong emotional responses such as fear or indignation. In highlighting crime rates or instances of corruption, the network cultivates an urgent narrative around social issues. Emotional appeal can lead to greater awareness of certain topics while guiding public opinion regarding specific solutions, usually aligned with the political position of the station (Gogo, 2024). This technique not only allows the dissemination of biased information, but also creates an atmosphere in which viewers are more susceptible to ideological manipulation and indoctrination.

In addition, the use of sensationalism serves as a significant tool in the formation of public perception. Both Syri TV and Vizion Plus prioritize sensational headlines and dramatic event coverage, be they political developments or social controversies. This focus on sensationalism promotes a culture of attention in the context of content search that can lead viewers to prioritize emotional involvement over critical thinking. Consequently, the public usually gets involved faster with the content that causes indignation or fascination, solidifying the propagandistic messages incorporated into the transmissions

Furthermore, the selective reporting technique is predominant among these Albanian networks. By strategically choosing which stories to emphasize or underestimate, Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus can manipulate the narrative landscape. For example, offering favorable reports about political allies, while defaming opponents, can build an environment in which the public's view aligns with the network's ideological orientation. This selectivity reinforces the prejudices among the public, further strengthening partisanship and shaping the narrative in a way that benefits specific political entities.

The framework, another significant technique, involves presenting questions in a specific light to shape the public's interpretation. Klan TV, for example, can frame economic challenges as a result of government incompetence rather than broader environmental or global factors. The way a story is framed can profoundly influence the public's understanding, guiding viewers to a reaction that aligns with the network's point of view. The framework reinforces the desired perspectives, contextualizing information in a specific way, ultimately influencing public opinion.

Finally, the use of wave effects is remarkable in these media channels. By showing popular opinion or portraying a widely accepted notion, these networks encourage viewers to align their thoughts and beliefs with this consensus. This technique capitalizes on the human tendency to conform, making individuals more likely to adopt ideas and opinions that seem to prevail in their social circles. This aspect of social validation can amplify the impact of advertising that is being disseminated, strengthening the influence of the network and the modified perceptions of the public.

In addition, Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus often employ interactive features such as polls and live question and answer sessions that invite the direct participation of the public. This participatory model serves to improve the spectators' agency; however, it can also distort perceptions of consent and credibility. When the public is committed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, the shared interaction creates an echo-chamber phenomenon, strengthening the distorted points of view and decreasing exposure to opposing perspectives. Therefore, the role of social media in the amplification of propaganda becomes multifaceted, as it simultaneously validates the individual points of view while intensifying the polarization within the public sphere.

The implications of these dynamics for public perceptions in Albania are profound. The narratives propagated by these television networks can model the social and political landscape, since they often have selective information framed in a way that aligns with wider ideological objectives. In addition, the speed and volume of sharing social media can lead to the rapid diffusion of disinformation, which complicates the public's ability to discern factual relationships from propaganda. Therefore, the channels used by Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus not only facilitate the dissemination of information, but actively shape the cognitive frames through which the public interprets political and social events.

Last but not least, the intricate relationship between these television networks and social media represents a critical area of study when examining the way in which propaganda techniques are used to influence public perceptions in Albania. Since demographic changes and digital involvement continue to evolve, understanding the mechanisms used by these television stations through social media is essential for understanding the complexity of the influence of the media on the attitudes and beliefs of the people. Tartari (2014) emphasizes the ability of the media to

function as powerful socialization agents, particularly in contexts where the political landscape is full of polarization and distrust.

Finally, the coverage of socioeconomic problems, such as unemployment and corruption, often exhibited a tendency of what could be called selective indignation. The four television stations tended to amplify stories that fit pre-existing narratives or those aligned with their political affiliations. For example, when addressing corruption scandals, Klan TV often gravitated to cases involving political adversaries, increasing the perception of systemic failure in the opposing party while overlooking cases of corruption amongst their favored political figures. This selective approach demonstrates how the powerful narrative of the media contributes to a fragmented public understanding of corruption, creating an environment where perceptions are dictated by the loyalty of the media organization instead of objective reports (Tartari, 2014).

These examples illustrate the significant impact that these TV stations have on Albanian public, demonstrating the potential for the media not only to report, but also manipulate perceptions through calculated editorial options and propaganda techniques. The cumulative effects of this coverage reveal a complex interaction between media narratives and public opinion, underlining the responsibility of media organizations in the configuration of democratic discourse. The impact of television stations such as Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus on social issues, with regards corruption, governance and public trust, attracts significant attention in the context of the Albanian media. As key actors in the Albanian transmission panorama, these stations are needed not only as sources of information, but also as agents for training public opinion. Their production often reflects a mixture of news and propaganda techniques that are strategically designed to influence the perceptions and attitudes of the Albanian public towards governance and corruption.

Corruption remains a pervasive question in Albania, attributed to systemic weak points both in government institutions and in social norms (Gjeloshi & Boshnjaku 2024, 198-199). The coverage of corruption often uses sensationalism and selective reports, a common feature in the media environments that strive to capture the attention of the spectators while advancing specific narratives (Bino & Kadia, 2017). For example, these networks can adopt a conflicting tone against public officials involved in corrupt practices, thus framing the discussion in a way that elicits public indignation. This approach not only highlights instances of corruption but can also serve to instill a sense of efficacy among the spectators, suggesting that the exposure of these offenses can lead to responsibility and reform.

On the other hand, the framing of the political actors and the actions of the government plays a crucial role in modeling public perceptions. The media representations that emphasize the incompetence or harmful intention of government officials can exacerbate public distrust. According to media theory, the way in which information is presented can significantly influence its interpretation by the public (Bino & Kadia, 2017). Therefore, the constant negative framing of political leaders or initiatives on Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus can generate a perception of pervasive dysfunction within the government, further undermining already fragile public trust.

In addition, the role of these television stations extends beyond simple relationships. Often, they engage in a narrative construction that aligns with specific ideological bases. Various reports on public policy decisions, particularly those relating to justice reforms and anti-corruption measures, are often contextualized within a wider narrative that criticizes the legitimacy of the state. By selectively highlighting faults or failures and minimizing successes, these networks

critically influence public attitudes towards governance structures. This selective amplification creates a cyclical reinforcement of skepticism and disillusionment for political processes among the Albanian public.

The strategic use of opinion programs and editorial contents also plays a fundamental role in modeling the narratives that **determine or influence whom or what the public should trust or not**. Each of the four television stations features various important commentators and political analysts who contribute to discussions that can color the public's understanding of both corruption and governance. For example, ethical concerns have been raised about the journalistic integrity of these programs, since opinion based on opinion often retain propaganda, obscuring the lines between information and persuasion.

Finally, during our monitoring, we have noticed that news programs represent the interests of political and economic elites rather than those of the public. Thus, news representing marginal groups or dissidents gets lost in the filters set by the media. Furthermore, according to a monitoring campaign done during January, February, and March 2022 on the three main television stations' central evening news programs at 19.30, TOP Channel, TV Klan and Vizion Plus, we see that TV Klan and Vizion Plus contain 45-50 percent ready news, or package news (Çupi, 2022). According to Çupi, this ready-made news or package news is in fact propaganda, "closely controlled and filtered by the producers, while the journalistic processing paradigm is very low". More than that, the news in minority languages reproduce the same pattern of ready-made news, since they are translated from Albanian into each minority language, leaving very little or no space for the ethnic minorities' (living in Albania) perspectives on the news presented (Stoica, 2018).

Another significant aspect in this respect is the influence of foreign media on local transmission channels in Albania, particularly through the dissemination of Turkish soap operas. This has deep implications for national identity and public perceptions. As Tartari (2014) pointed out, the penetration of the narratives of the Turkish media in Albanian homes through Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV, and Vizion Plus illustrates the complex interaction between globalization and local cultural consumption. The popularity of Turkish dramas among the Albanian public not only reflects a change in entertainment preferences, but also serves as a conduit for foreign cultural norms and ideologies, which can remodel local identity constructions.

Turkish soap operas have become very popular in the Albanian media, where they are often subtitled, becoming accessible to a broader audience. These issues often revolve around family relationships, social conflicts and romantic dynamics, which resonate with the Albanian public on a personal level, as well as on a historical one, since the Albanians had been under the Ottoman rule for about 500 years. However, underlying stories frequently defend values and norms that can diverge from traditional Albanian cultural principles, which vary a lot based on religion. Even though the majority of the Albanian population is Muslim, there are also many Christian Orthodox located mainly in South-Eastern Albania and Catholics found mainly in the Northern part of the country (Instat, *Censi i popullsisë dhe banesave në Shqipëri*, 2023, p. 76). This infusion of foreign content has the potential to alter the perceptions of social roles, gender dynamics and moral values, which gradually leads to a reconfiguration of the national identity that is aligned with the homogenizing cultural discourse presented in these shows.

In addition, the strategic placement of Turkish soap operas, especially historical ones, on the popular Albanian channels suggests a deliberate attempt on the part of these channels to capitalize on the preferences of the audience, thus influencing their collective consciousness. The sustained

consumption of this content can generate a feeling of familiarity and acceptance of Turkish culture, and, by extension, a potential appropriation of its values mainly based on a long common history. These narratives, once adopted, serve as vehicles for the spread of cultural and ideological elements that are mainly based on Turkish society. These channels not only shape the content, but also frame it in a way that normalizes the foreign perspectives presented in it, which impacts the way in which Albanian spectators perceive their own social constructions and cultural identity. The representation of lifestyle aspirations, social relations, and personal success within the Turkish series often contrasts with Albanian realities, potentially promoting an aspirational mentality that diverges from the local mentality. In addition, the production and transmission strategies used by these channels, including marketing techniques that emphasize the brightness and glamor associated with Turkish soap operas, further strengthens this foreign influence. Spectators are encouraged to commit to the aspirational narratives offered by these programs, often at the expense of local narration and cultural representation. The resulting speech on Turkish media can lead to a decreased interaction with domestic narratives, thus influencing public perceptions of local identity in favor of a more globalized and homogenized cultural perspective.

In the digital age, media consumption patterns are experiencing significant transformations, largely driven by the proliferation of digital devices and social media platforms. This change presents an opportunity and a challenge for traditional televisions such as Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus. On the one hand, the interactivity of social networks allows a rapid dissemination of information and a platform for various voices; on the other hand, it can facilitate the spread of erroneous information and content. Furthermore, politicians no longer need to connect with traditional media or hold face-to-face meetings to reach out to the public. Online media offers a benefit by allowing one to create one's own media content without having to rely on traditional media. For example, the practice of government-exclusive coverage started in 2017 when Prime Minister Rama announced that he would open his own communication channel, called Edi Rama Television (ERTV). Since 2017, when this channel was opened, almost every government activity has been presented under the logo of ERTV, and often local media cannot access materials that are available from the office of the Prime Minister. Consequently, the potential for reform in the media of public services becomes essential to counteract these trends and foster an informed citizenship.

Bino and Kadia (2017) emphasize that Albania's public service media is crucial for improving credibility and creating a more informed public discourse. They argue that promoting the transmission of genuine public service media is based on independence from political and commercial interests, ensuring that the content is promoted as a result of journalistic integrity rather than propaganda objectives. This structural transformation is essential in order to mitigate the influence of other media that have historically prioritized sensationalism and biased reports over balanced journalism (Skana & Gjerazi 2024, Dervishi 2025).

In addition, as a younger generation is increasingly involved in the media through online platforms, there is an urgency to adapt media education and literacy initiatives. Empowering the public with critical media skills can serve as a counterweight to the propaganda that often permeates the news cycles. When citizens recognize and criticize the biased propaganda reports and techniques, the power of established points of sale can decrease, and public perceptions can be formed by facts instead of preconceived narratives, which allows for a more democratized media.

The regulatory framework surrounding Albanian media also plays an important role in this context. The reforms aimed at improving transparency and responsibility among media entities could mitigate the concentration of media ownership, which often leads to the propagation of homogeneous perspectives and points of view. A pluralistic media environment can stimulate a healthy public debate and serve as a deterrent against extremist ideologies that can exploit divisions within society.

Looking towards the future, it is imperative that the Albanian government, together with civil society organizations, prioritize the establishment of solid regulatory mechanisms that not only defend journalistic standards but also promote diversity in programming. This effort can be supported by initiatives that encourage associations between media organizations and academic institutions, thus improving research and dialogue on the ethical implications of media practices. In addition, the construction of cross-border collaborations with international organizations can introduce the best practices in the transmission of public services that prioritize integrity and independence.

The challenges confronting Albanian journalists

While Albania has made significant advances in promoting a free press since the fall of communism, state and commercial pressures continue to suffocate the true essence of journalistic integrity. As we have shown in the previous section, propaganda remains a powerful force that complicates the landscape of the freedom of the media. More than that, journalists fight with the dual challenges of maintaining their independence amid a politically loaded environment and navigating the commercial imperatives that govern their profession. These multifaceted pressures underline the critical need for mechanisms that protect journalists and promote a media environment that prioritizes integrity over political or commercial loyalty. The legal framework that governs the freedom of the media in Albania is influenced by both national legislation and international commitments, raising a complex panorama for journalists. The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, adopted in 1998, guarantees freedom of expression, explicitly affirming in article 22 that “all have the right to freely express their thoughts and opinions”. This constitutional provision provides fundamental guarantees for the freedom of the press; however, its application is frequently challenged by state intervention and political pressures.

An important relevant legislation concerning the freedom of the media is the Law of Information of Public Interest, promulgated in 1999. This law requires public institutions to provide transparency and access to information, thus supporting the ability of journalists to investigate and inform citizens about public matters. Despite its importance, the efficiency of this law is often undermined by bureaucratic inertia and frequent breaches by state institutions, which can suffocate journalistic efforts to continue their investigations.

Furthermore, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) regulates the transmission sector, supervising compliance with established media standards. While the AMA was established to defend journalistic integrity and equity, its independence has been questioned, with accusations of government influence that affect its operations (*Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*, 2021). Critics often argue that the selection process for leadership positions within the AMA lacks transparency [European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Opinion no. 980/2020], which raises concerns about the impartiality of the regulatory body in

their treatment of journalists, particularly those who are critical of the government. In addition to these national legal frameworks, Albania's obligations in accordance with several international treaties, including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and its aspiration for membership in the European Union (EU) play a fundamental role in the configuration of media laws. The ECHR, in accordance with Article 10(1), guarantees freedom of expression and offers a critical reference point for evaluating national legislation. Albania's compliance with this international standard is often analyzed when state actions seem to contravene the principles enshrined in the Convention.

However, despite these legal guarantees, in practice media freedom in Albania is precarious. The media panorama is marked by a high concentration of ownership, mainly through some significant commercial entities that exercise substantial control over published content (Petković, B., Hodžić, S., 2020, p. 6-7). This concentration raises alarms about the potential for propaganda and biased reports, since commercial interests can bias editorial independence, which further complicates the already challenging position of journalists. The entanglement of the ownership of the media with political interests has led to a phenomenon by which the lines between journalism and propaganda become blurred, which affects public access to objective information.

In addition, the interaction of state and commercial pressures is manifested in the form of the intimidation and harassment of journalists. The law provides mechanisms for legal appeal; however, the judicial system is sometimes perceived as insufficiently independent (*European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report*), which makes journalists vulnerable to legal actions that suffocate dissident opinions. The instances of violence against journalists and impunity for perpetrators exacerbate this chilling effect, creating an environment where fear can inhibit journalistic integrity and independence¹. According to the Partners of the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists, media freedom in Albania continues to deteriorate². Citizen Channel, a nonprofit and independent media outlet, suffered a cyberattack in April 2024³. While the Tirana Judicial District Prosecution announces six cases reported in 2023 by journalists complaining of violence and threats against them while they were on duty.

To sum up, while Albania has a legal framework that supports media freedom, realities suggest a significant gap between legal norms and their implementation. The challenges faced by journalists in the maintenance of independence and integrity during state and commercial pressures continue to raise formidable obstacles for a truly free and vibrant media. The intricate interaction of laws, regulatory bodies, property structures and external pressures encapsulate the complex environment that journalists must struggle against in their search for truth and transparency. The political landscape of Albania has historically presented an extremely difficult environment for journalists, characterized by significant pressures that hinder media freedom. According to Voko and Likmeta (2023), the interaction between the influence of the State and commercial interests has created a precarious situation for journalistic integrity. Their research stresses that politicians manipulate media stories through a multifaceted approach, using direct and indirect means of pressure. These methods include legislative measures, financial incentives and the strategic dissemination of propaganda.

1. Albanian Journalist Fired and her Documentary Censored after a Direct Intervention of the Mayor of Tirana <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/21719451>

2. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/liria-e-medias-ne-shqiperi-po-perkeqesohet/32137315.html>

3. <https://zeri.ai/aktualitet/ohet-citizens-channel-1197676>

One of the most notable ways in which political actors exercise media control consists in going through legislative frameworks that restrict journalistic practices. Voko and Likmeta (2023) detail several cases where laws have been promulgated or modified in order to limit transparency and freedom of expression. For example, the introduction of laws that impose heavy sanctions for defamation or for the distribution of “false news” has created a scary effect on journalists,⁴ by discouraging them from critically reporting on government activities. The potential for punitive measures is dissuasive, leading many press organizations to censor their content to avoid punitive repercussions.

In addition to legal pressures, there is a financial dimension that further complicates the landscape Albanian journalists are faced with. Many media in the country depend on the government’s advertising revenues, creating a dependency which can compromise editorial independence. Voko and Likmeta (2023) note that this financial dependence often results in compromised reports, where the fear of losing vital financial support leads publishers and journalists to adopt a more favorable position towards the government. This dynamic promotes a media environment where state actions and policies are often presented in a positive light, effectively operating as a channel for state propaganda rather than an independent watchdog.

Trade pressures, aggravated by political ambitions, also play an important role in the formation of the journalistic landscape. Voko and Likmeta (2023) underline the rise of oligarchic media in Albania, whereby a small number of individuals control large segments of the media landscape. This concentration of ownership often aligns with political factions, blurring even more the boundaries between journalism and political propaganda. Journalists working in such contexts are faced with two pressures: navigating the expectations of their employers and the political narratives of the state. The resulting environment demonstrates a disturbing convergence of interests that stifles viewpoint diversity and hinders investigative journalism.

Some characteristics regarding the Albanian media landscape

Starting from previous research and recent reports on the challenges Albanian journalists face in protecting media freedom in Albania, which we have summarized above, we have developed our own descriptive and exploratory research in order to test whether the same challenges persist or whether new ones have appeared, using a questionnaire as an instrument for measuring these issues for journalists in Albania. Online Survey for Journalists in Albania on the Topic: “Propaganda, Challenges for Journalists in Protecting Media Freedom in Albania, and the Approach of the Albanian Audience to Media Literacy and Fact-Checking” was sent through email and professional media platforms between December 4, 2023, and December 5, 2024. The survey was addressed to a group of 27 journalists, purposefully selected to cover a wide range of media (private, public, local and national) and political views. Out of this group 17 journalists responded, representing a percentage of 46% of those contacted. According to the responses, more female journalists answered the questionnaire than men, 59%, while male journalist’s account for 41% of the respondents. The highest percentage of journalists who responded to the questionnaire belong to the 30-year-old age group, 59%. Following that, the 46–64-year-old age group represents 24%, and finally, the youngest age group, 23–29-year-olds, represents 18%. The highest number of journalists (35%) involved in the survey are working for online media, followed by national

4. *Defamation Trials* <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/albania/albania0602-04.htm>

television (29%). National radio employs 18% of the respondents, while 29% are freelancers and 6% work in local radio.

The questionnaire contained a mixed format of questions, including multiple choice and open-ended questions. The quantitative data analysis was done by means of Excel and the qualitative data analysis consisted mainly of the thematic analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions.

Based on the responses to our survey from 17 Albanian journalists, several key-characteristics can be drawn from their answers regarding the media landscape and the challenges faced by journalists:

1. *Lack of Voice in Identifying and Denouncing Propaganda:* Journalists and media organizations in Albania face significant challenges in raising their voices against propaganda. This is primarily due to fears of losing their jobs. A notable portion of respondents also believes that while independent journalists exist, they are few. This suggests a climate of fear and a lack of support for independent journalism in the country.
2. Journalists expressed a range of concerns regarding the *role of social media in spreading propaganda and fake news*. The lack of regulation and censorship on social media platforms is seen as a key contributor to this issue. There is also concern about the influence of political actors using social media to further their agendas. Journalists acknowledged the difficulty in managing the rapid spread of unverified information, which undermines the credibility of news.
3. *Financial constraints are a significant barrier to media independence.* Many journalists highlighted that financial dependency on questionable sources or political interests compromises the ability of media outlets to maintain objectivity. There is also a noticeable challenge in sustaining independent journalism due to low wages, poor working conditions, and the lack of proper contracts. The economic pressure makes it harder for investigative journalism to thrive.
4. Participants in the survey report that journalists in Albania are experiencing *direct and indirect threats and pressures*, particularly when covering sensitive topics such as corruption and political issues. While some seek support from journalist organizations, others face a lack of professional security and legal protection, which further jeopardizes their ability to work freely. This environment creates challenges for the integrity of journalism in the country.
5. While some international and local organizations provide *limited* support, journalists believe it is often insufficient. Many of the initiatives are seen as short-term projects rather than sustained efforts to address the root problems of media freedom and journalist safety. There is a need for stronger, more consistent support for independent media and protection for journalists in Albania.
6. *Need for Legal Reforms and Enhanced Professional Support:* Journalists emphasize the necessity to better protect media freedom and ensure a safer working environment. Calls for better wages, improved working conditions, and the creation of stronger legal protections for journalists are common. Additionally, there is a demand for more training programs for young journalists to equip them with the skills to navigate the challenges of modern journalism.
7. *Solidarity Among Journalists and Professional Ethics:* Many journalists stressed the importance of solidarity within the profession. This includes providing support for those facing pressure or threats and creating a more united front among journalists working in different media outlets. Upholding high professional standards and ethics is seen as a crucial tool in managing the challenges posed by the media landscape.

8. Journalists also recognized the need for *greater public awareness and education* regarding the importance of media freedom and independent journalism. Educating both the public and media professionals about the ethical standards of journalism and the role of media in democracy is viewed as essential for overcoming the challenges facing the industry.

Conclusions

Concerning Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus, these media outlets have contributed considerably to the construction of public perceptions in Albania by the strategic use of various propaganda techniques. By taking advantage of emotional commitment, selective reports, and the intersection of entertainment with journalism, these media have not only influenced the immediate reactions of their audience but have also facilitated long-term changes in public opinion and societal standards. Overall, their roles highlight the importance of critically assessing media consumption in the context of contemporary Albanian society. The combined effect of these influences illustrates the power of the media in training not only perceptions, but also the collective consciousness of a nation going through complex socio-political landscapes. The proliferation of media, such as Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus, in the Albanian context, underlined the need for critical media literacy among the public. These channels have exerted their influence to shape the perceptions of the public through various propaganda techniques, requiring a solid understanding of the media mechanisms among viewers. The spread of disinformation, selective reports and emotional manipulation, often characterized by subjective stories, illustrates the imperative for individuals to acquire skills to critically assess the content of the media.

Critical media literacy implies the ability to access, analyze, assess, and create media in various forms. For the Albanian public, who are consumers of content from Top Channel, Klan TV, Syri TV and Vizion Plus, this set of skills is particularly crucial to identify biases and discern the intentions behind the media messages. As these networks use techniques such as sensationalism and framing to influence the perceptions of political events and social problems, the public must be aware of the ways in which the media can distort reality. Çupi (2022) postulates that without such literacy, individuals may be likely to be manipulated, inhibiting their ability to formulate informed opinions and to participate significantly in societal discourse.

The contextual landscape of Albania, marked by a historic backdrop of political instability and consolidation of the media, further complicates the media consumption experience for the public. Many viewers may not have the knowledge or resources required to navigate the media complexities in a way that promotes critical thinking. The alignment of certain media with political or economic interests can lead to an overwhelming presence of biased information. For example, when Klan TV presents news that disproportionately promotes specific political agendas, the public's lack of critical skills leads to a homogenization of perspectives, stifling pluralist dialogue.

Considering these factors, the promotion of critical media literacy becomes an essential component of a democratic society. Educational initiatives aimed at improving the capacities of individuals to discern the quality of the information presented by various media channels can allow the Albanian public to develop informed opinions based on a complete understanding of political and social contexts. The promotion of skills such as questioning the credibility of a source, recognizing emotional calls, and assessing evidence can help to mitigate the effects of propaganda.

While the public becomes more competent in these skills, they can actively engage in discussions and demand responsibility for media producers, promoting a healthier media environment.

In addition, the role of civil society organizations and educational establishments is central in a democracy. By developing programs that focus on critical media and the organization of workshops that promote media literacy, stakeholders can facilitate more informed citizenship. This involvement will not only serve to improve public discourse but will also inculcate a sense of responsibility among media consumers, allowing individuals to resist manipulative messages that seek to exploit their emotional responses or ideological predispositions. The democratization of information is ultimately based on an audience equipped with the tools necessary to differentiate factual news, opinion, and propaganda.

While the Albanian media landscape continues to evolve, the relationship between media consumption and critical commitment will remain at the forefront of societal development. Strengthening the importance of critical media literacy is not simply an academic priority; it is a proactive position to ensure that the Albanian public is well equipped to face the complexities of modern media, thus contributing to the creation of a more transparent and more informed public sphere. The media landscape in Albania is characterized by financial struggles, political pressures, threats to journalists, and a lack of institutional support. While journalists are committed to upholding professional ethics, there is a strong call for systemic reforms, more substantial support, and solidarity to ensure that media can function freely and independently in the country.

Our research demonstrates that propaganda considerably undermines media freedom in Albania by creating a hostile environment for journalistic practice. Double pressures of state interventions and commercial dependencies hamper the ability of journalists to maintain independence and integrity. While efforts to promote the literacy of media and improve the capacity of independent journalism continue, the fundamental challenges resulting from state and commercial interests remain deeply anchored, requiring a concerted response from civil society, media organizations and political decision-makers to promote a more equitable media landscape. The need for solid media freedom in Albania is underlined by its key role as a milestone of democratic resilience. In the context of a post-communist country trying to fulfill its democratic aspirations, the media work should not be understood only as a conduit of information, but also as a protection against government and commercial excesses. However, the panorama of the Albanian media is increasingly framed by challenges, from state and commercial pressures that often obscure the lines between objective relationships and propaganda narratives.

Supporting media freedom in Albania is essential for several reasons. Firstly, a free press promotes transparency and responsibility, both fundamental for the functioning of a democratic society. In Albania, the ability of the media to operate independently can significantly influence the public discourse. When journalists have the power to investigate and report without fear of censorship or punishment, they contribute to an informed citizenship. This dynamic is fundamental for the promotion of democratic values and the strengthening of civil society. In addition, media freedom acts as a bulwark against propaganda, an instrument often employed by both state actors and commercial interests to manipulate public perceptions. In an environment where disinformation can proliferate, supporting a free and independent media is vital to ensure that different points of view are represented. Propaganda, in its various forms, threatens not only the media but also the social fabric by promoting polarization and eroding trust in legitimate

institutions. The manipulation of information can lead to a poorly informed population susceptible to state control, thus undermining the very foundations of democracy.

The challenges that Albanian journalists face in maintaining independence and integrity cannot be understated. Journalists often face the limitations imposed by government structures that try to circumvent dissenting items through regulatory measures and financial pressures. These pressures can manifest themselves as politically motivated causes, harassment or economic coercions, which serve to inhibit journalistic freedom. In addition, commercial interests can complicate the media panorama by forcing media outlets to give priority to financing and advertising revenues, often at the expense of editorial independence. As a result, journalists can find themselves navigating in a precarious balance between state intimidation and commercial profitability, which can lead to self-censorship.

The rise of digital media further complicates these challenges. While it provides opportunities for alternative news items, it simultaneously allows the rapid diffusion of disinformation. The digital environment allows actors sponsored by the state to engage in targeted campaigns that undermine credible journalistic efforts, creating an ecosystem in which factual relationships compete with viral disinformation. Therefore, together with the legislative support for the freedom of the media, there is an urgent need for strategies that equip journalists to effectively challenge propaganda.

Ultimately, the support for media freedom in Albania is an integral part of promoting a society that enhances democratic commitment and resilience. As political and economic pressures intensify, the global community, as well as local parties, must gather to support initiatives that strengthen journalistic integrity. This support can assume various forms, including legal protections for journalists as well as the efforts to build the ability for and the promotion of ethical journalism standards. Ensuring that the media remain a genuine platform for the freedom of speech is not only crucial for the well-being of Albanian democracy but acts as a testimony of the resilience of its civil society. In order to guarantee a future that recognizes both the importance of different points of view and the integrity of information, it is essential to support the protection of media freedoms as a fundamental value within the wider democratic framework of Albania.

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