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Online Media and Political Communication in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans

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Abstract

In the digital age, online media has become a key platform for public political communication, reshaping the landscape of political discourse and social engagement. This paper proposes a typology framework to classify various forms of online media and elaborate on their distinct roles and functions in political communication. Using interdisciplinary research perspectives from media studies, political science, and communication theory, the typology categorizes online media into distinct types, explaining how they determine communication in the political sphere. Furthermore, the paper examines how different types of online media are utilized by political actors, interest groups, and citizens to disseminate information, mobilize political support, shape public opinion, and improve civic engagement. The scope of the research includes a review of existing case studies on online media in North Macedonia and Western Balkans, combined with empirical analysis of prominent platforms across different types and demographics. Cultural and linguistic biases may influence the interpretation of findings, particularly in cross-cultural analyses. By mapping out the diverse ecosystem of online media and their different uses in public political communication, this typology contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between technology, media, and politics in the digital era. A sample analysis will be presented, illustrating the application of the typological framework to a selection of popular online media platforms

Keywords: Online media, Political Communication, Media Typology

Typology Of Online Media And Political Communication In North Macedonia And Western Balkans

The advent of the Internet brought a new shift in the development of the media and a significant pluralization of communication platforms. The mass media that were used before the Internet are now usually named traditional media, while the term "new media" began to be used for the Internet and other digital media. New media is now considered to be closely related to all forms of media based on digital technologies. The distinction between old and new media is relativized over time due to the fact that the relations between the media are changing while traditional media are continuously transforming. Also, new media are getting new uses and technical upgrades, so print media and broadcast media are now regularly publishing their content online. Some of them do this through websites, some through streaming, others through applications, and many other different channels. In the current academic and scientific debates, more precise determination and delimitation of different media formats are needed in order to define online media more clearly. The distinction between old and new media is important for several reasons:

a. Understanding media evolution and impact of the media on society - Recognizing the changes from old to new media help us understand how communication has evolved over time and the impact of media on social changes. Old media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, shaped cultural norms and social values differently than new media, like social media platforms and online news, for example. The power dynamics in new media can be more fluid, with influencers and citizen journalists gaining significant influence, unlike the more hierarchical structure of old media. Additionally, new media accelerates the spread of information (and disinformation), impacting public opinion and societal change at a faster rate.

b. Better researching of technological differences - Old media typically involved more centralized production and distribution mechanisms, while new media allows for decentralized and user-generated content. Additionally, new media has a broader and more immediate reach, making information accessible to a global audience almost instantaneously.

c. Follow consumer behavior - New media often provide interactive experiences (e.g., social media, comments sections) compared to the one-way communication of old media. The way audiences engage with content has changed, with new media offering more personalized and on-demand consumption.

d. Transform and develop economic models - Old media often rely on subscription and advertisement-based models, whereas new media includes a mix of advertising, subscription, and data monetization. New media has also lowered the barriers to entry for content creators, leading to a more diverse range of voices and perspectives in the public sphere.

e. Improving regulation and media ethics - New media platforms face unique challenges in content moderation and dealing with misinformation, requiring different regulatory approaches compared to old media. The data collection practices of new media platforms raise privacy concerns that were not as prevalent with old media.

f. Improvement of educational and professional training - Different skill sets are required for working in old versus new media, affecting educational curricula and professional training programs. The rise of new media has created new career opportunities and job roles that did not exist in the era of old media**.** Understanding these distinctions helps in comprehensively analyzing the media landscape, preparing for future developments, and addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by new media.

Methods

This paper researches the key issues of the development of the new digital media, their classification and types, and their influence on political communication in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region. The paper treats these issues specifically for North Macedonia in comparison with the key trends and processes in the region of the Western Balkans. The focus of the paper is analyzing the relations between the media ecosystems and the influence on political communication in the North Macedonia specified region. Through a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis of available public data, scientific reports, and qualitative examination of policy documents and key stakeholder interviews, this study aims to disclose the complex nature of the influence of the online media in political communication in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to both academic discourse and public information by identifying key challenges and potential solutions to promote a more inclusive and equitable digital ecosystem in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans. The data presented in the study through the referenced sources change very dynamically in relatively short periods of time. The results and

the findings are limited in the given social contexts and periods of time. However, some key principles and broader processes can be identified through the data provided in this study.

Typology of the Modern Media

At the beginning of this research, it can be noted that one of the most important classifications of the mass media is how media changes historically or through time. Researching historical transformations of media helps better understand their practical uses in social contexts and how they impacted different historical processes and changes. The problem with this type of differentiation of media is that, through time, they gradually lose their scientific precision, so additional specifications are needed. Bachovska (2018) argues that the basis of the media is always technology that is constantly changing. Labeling certain technologies with the term 'new media' is the most elegant way to avoid inaccuracies. Thus, radio, at one time, was a new medium in relation to the daily press, while television was a new medium in relation to radio. Today, 'new media' refers to the Internet and the various media/forms they enable.

A second type of classification of mass media is based on the physical characteristics of the medium used. According to these criteria, the following types of media can be distinguished:

a) Analogue media – They can be non-electronic and electronic, and in the process of information transmission, they are based on the reproduction of information through physical medium formats, serving as carriers of signs, sounds, and images. This physically based reproduction and spreading of information takes place through the so-called analog devices and media, including paper, fax machines, vinyl discs, magnetic tapes, audio and video cassettes, VHS video tapes, and others. Traditional media are also analog media because their time classification coincides with the communication technologies they use.

b) Print media - Using print paper as media for the transmission of information. This type of media includes newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, leaflets, and several other printed forms. Print media are tangible and can be physically handled. They include paper-based formats like newspapers and magazines. Once printed, the content cannot be altered. This contrasts with digital media, where content can be updated or modified easily. Unlike digital media, print media offers minimal to no interactivity. Readers cannot click links or engage with multimedia ele-

ments. Print media require physical distribution, such as delivery by mail, purchase at newsstands, or library availability. Printed materials can last for a long time if properly preserved, providing a historical record of information.

c) Electronic media - Using electricity and electric devices to transmit messages to a mass audience. Radio and television are included in this group, complemented by fax machines and CD and DVD devices, but it should be noted that this group also includes computers and other digital devices. One of the most common terms used for these media, focusing on radio and television, is "broadcast media", related to their technique of distributing (broadcasting) information through radio-magnetic waves and antenna systems.

d) Digital media – Bachovska (2018) defines them as media that use the digital code, or "media encoded in a machine-readable format". The following formats are part of digital media: digital texts (e-books), digital sound, digital photos, digital videos, digital animations, video games, websites, social media, digital databases, digital programs, i.e., software, mobile applications, and others. In addition to the mentioned digital formats, digital electronic devices are also included in digital media. Consequently, they include computers, portable computers (laptops), mobile phones (2 G, 3G, 4G, 5 G, i.e., smartphone devices), tablets (tablet computers), electronic readers, portable memory devices (USB, external drives), peripheral digital devices (keyboard, mouse, scanners, etc.), external auxiliary devices, such as printers, speakers and others.

With digital media, there is no need for physical reproduction of information and content. Text, sound, and images are reproduced much more easily by copying and duplicating the digital code of the information. This allows for easy, fast, cheap, and unlimited dissemination of information. Digital media are also specific as they offer better quality and greater accuracy of content. Analog devices and their physical formats are more easily damaged and lose their quality through physical reproduction. This important feature for easy and free reproduction of information certainly contributes to the easier forming of the digital public sphere, or the online sphere, which will be discussed later. It de facto enables the formation and spread of information globally, helps inclusiveness through free access to information and political processes, and has numerous other related effects. Digital media make it easier not only to create content but also to distribute it. They also help in the process of forming new types of communities, the so-called "online communities", which enable civic participation and activism through the Internet. The downside of these technological features of digital media is the disruption of existing cop-

yright systems and the filtering of information from disinformation. Due to the easy reproduction and dissemination of digital content, problems with online piracy and the easy spread of disinformation arise.

e) Online media - Online media refers to devices and content that are accessible via the Internet. Online media represent one of the subtypes of digital media, and their difference resembles the differentiation of the Internet and the Web, where the Internet is the wide network, the platform, while the Web is the subsystem that connects the various web domains, web pages, and platforms that function on the Internet as a sub-network. In this case, it can be noted that all online media are digital media, but not all digital media are automatically online media. For example, digital readers (e-readers) are part of the group of digital media, but they are not automatically online media because they can be used without a connection to the Internet. They do have the ability to connect online, but they can be used without a constant internet connection. Smartphones and game consoles have, for example, similar performative capabilities and functions. Digital media can be used both online and offline, unlike defined online media, which cannot function without an internet connection. This group includes websites, web portals, blogs, social networks (Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube, streaming platforms), and other platforms for exchanging information, such as online forums, news aggregators, and other information services.

The Internet is a multimedia type of communication hub through which all other media are connected, including traditional or classic media. They use the Internet as a source of information but also as a platform for distributing their content. The internet is gradually changing the nature of traditional media, which cannot function in the same way as it did before the advent of the internet. This kind of practical indispensability, according to many analysts, will lead to the Internet surpassing all other media and being a completely dominant platform. According to Livingstone (2005: pp. 12-13), the Internet and online media have four key features:

a) New media shape society, and then, in return, society influences them, thus creating the so-called "hybridization of existing technologies and social processes".

b) New media and online platforms have a network structure, or they represent "a wide, multiplied connection in which many points (individuals, groups, databases, technological devices, etc.) are intertwined. In them, the communication structure has changed from one-to-all to all-to-all".

c) Ubiquity – New media are not used by everyone, but they influence everyone. The incorporation of the Internet and modern technologies in the economy, banking, education, politics, and many others, directly or indirectly affects all levels of the functioning of societies.

d) Interactivity, i.e., new media allow searching and selecting information, which is not possible with traditional media. Interactivity is a key feature that enables personalization as a factor in many other processes, including changes in how the public sphere functions and fluctuates.

Digitalisation and Media Convergence

Media devices and traditional media are undergoing a dynamic digitization process, so smart TVs, different formats of digital and interactive television, radio applications, and news websites are now all providing options for selecting content, pausing, and recording. It can be noted that there are many hybrid or transitional forms between different types of media. Since the production of communication technologies is closely related to the market system, their development is bound by their uses, as well as by the habits and demands of users. Thus, the classifications themselves should be carefully contextualized and defined, among other things, in the domain of their practical uses. In this context, we can define more precisely the process of so-called media convergence, which explains the current overlapping of media forms more closely. Digital technologies enable the convergence of different media formats. They are increasingly connected and intertwined, and for example, we can mention the MP3 audio format. In the past, this media format was used by a smaller number of digital devices on which it could be played, such as "MP3 players" or on a computer with appropriate software. Today, this format can be used on a huge number of devices, from mobile phones to tablets and smart TVs. Also, individual digital devices can reproduce a large number of different media formats, such as the mentioned smart TVs, which, in addition to digital signals for television channels, can also reproduce a number of different digital formats, from video files to interactive content like video games.

It is important to note that not only are media formats converging, but also the content itself is converging, and the media industry is using digital technologies to distribute elements of the same content on a number of different platforms; this leads to the emergence of a new type of content, the s.c. transmedia content. It should also be added that the development of the media does not lead to the dis-

appearance of the previous media. Newspapers, television, and radio do not disappear but gradually change their formats and adapt to the needs of their audiences. The dynamics of technological changes require a rapid realignment in which some media are more and some less successful. For example, the New York Times, one of the most respected media in the United States, in 2019 managed to record an increase in earnings of over 800 million dollars through its digital platforms, which confirms that digitization does not destroy previous forms of media, but forces them to change and adapt to new technologies. Certain authors advocate the thesis that new media do not lead to the "death of traditional media and television, but they accelerate are adapting to the Internet". There is no radical and complete break between new and old media because even for new media, the media infrastructure used by traditional media and their transmission systems is still important (their newsrooms are used, a reporting network composed of reporters, correspondents, journalists are transitioning to online journalists, their telephone connections, broadcasting systems, satellite communication and more are used).

Influence of the Online Media on the Political Communication in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia

Internet users today have various opportunities for open public communication and publication of information. Most of them are well-versed in the publishing and communication options of social networks. Services such as Facebook, Instagram, and X are the most used platforms for public announcements or for announcements with customized access from other users. YouTube is the most used video service for publishing video content, and the number of users is continuously increasing. According to Bachovska (2018, p. 11), the Internet offers a large amount of information that is quickly accessible, with the possibility of checking, researching, storing, and archiving information and data. The term citizen journalism refers to the era of modern journalism made possible by the Internet, the possibility for anyone to post news, and the marginalization of the difference between the recipient and the sender of information. Blogging, mobile journalism, and citizen journalism have led to the complete democratization of the possibility of being an informant, transmitting information, and receiving information. All this has slowly but surely caused a restructuring of the media systems. Unlike traditional media, where messages are sent only in one direction, the Internet provides a space for the recipients of the messages to comment so that under the news posts, numerous reactions can be found, mostly on social networks and on the websites where they

are published if users' comments are technically available. On these online platforms various discussions and arguments develop, as this new public space allows content creators to directly monitor the reactions to their messages. This communication reciprocity profoundly changes public political communication.

Today, information that has an impact on the creation of public opinion is published not only by journalists and media but also by different types of publishers such as bloggers, users of social networks, citizen journalists, online creators of public opinion (influencers) and a number of other sources that participate in public communication. There are various forms of software, such as digital programs, websites, web services, or applications, that provide a public space and forum for open communication where citizens can participate in public discussions and debates. These services can connect citizens, the resources they use, and the different ideas that are in circulation in a certain community or society. They also provide access to other information, give citizens a voice before the public, and create conditions for transparency and accountability of the government. These new forms, software, websites, and apps have increasingly become the center of political discussion and activism. Some of these new forms, in addition to social networks, are blogs, wiki pages, and online petitions. They are new places and a new communication space that not only expand the existing public sphere but also create a new kind of public sphere with different characteristics and a different quality from the existing public sphere of printed and broadcast media. In North Macedonia and the wider region of Western Balkans, various types of attacks through information systems in many countries have gradually included politics, so that the Internet or online warfare has become a common, or conventionalized, way of conducting the political struggle in these environments. Party activists and supporters, parallel to the public political contest, develop various covert or semi-covert ways in the political struggle: campaigns of hate speech directed at individuals or groups, political mobilization for protests or other events, discrediting opponents, spreading disinformation and fake news, as well as other controversial activities mainly through social networks. According to Dzigal (2021), one of the most common occurrences in the political online struggle in this region is the use of disinformation and fake news. They are usually published on online platforms or on social networks, and then, depending on the public reactions, they are gradually transferred to the traditional media and in the communication of the political parties. It can be noted that online platforms are largely used as a training field where various half-information, misinformation, and polarizing narratives are tested so that those that receive more attention or reactions become an integral part of the policies of political parties and other groups.

The main focus of disinformation is the online media, but due to poor professional standards and media partisanship, a large portion of it often ends up published in the electronic and print media as well, without much journalistic filtering. The main registered activities in the use of disinformation for political purposes are as follows, according to Dzigal (2011), are:

- Discrediting political opponents and running negative campaigns against individuals or groups.
- ncreasing political and civic polarization, with the aim of mobilizing citizens to vote and participate in rallies or protests, party campaigns, etc.
- Increasing ethnic or inter-religious tensions for political purposes (for example, to accuse a party of nationalism or incompetence in crisis management, for. e.g., during COVID-19).
- Reinforcing radical political narratives that call for rebellion, intolerance, or other forms of political resistance.
- Challenging political agreements, processes, or plans (for example, the Prespa agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, a referendum on the name of the country in 2018, etc.).
- Violation of the freedom and reputation of professional journalism and local media.
- Promotion of pseudoscience, superstition, and conspiracy theories.
- Polarizing relations between the countries in the region, such as the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo in 2022/2023.

The main activities of these politically organized groups are the amplification of certain propaganda content through planned dissemination, which is usually carried out through mass publication, sharing, liking, commenting, linking, etc. In this way, fabricated virilizations, popularity, moral panic, or feelings of fear are created. These organized actions on social networks often manage to create certain "hacking" of the algorithms used by social networks and news aggregators and to circulate these messages and contents to the wider public in the country. Organized campaigns of attacks on individuals or groups are also a key activity on social networks for political purposes. These activities are not intended to be in the headlines but in a covert form to put pressure on them. Planned attacks are carried out through public mockery, insults, direct attacks in the form of hate speech, or other types of verbal attacks and pressures. Their goal is to eliminate opposing or

different narratives and views from those these users espouse. For these purposes, processed data from social networks or official documents are often used, which can be framed, decontextualized, or manipulated in various ways (doctored materials, edited videos, created memes, messages taken out of context, etc.).

Conclusion

It can be summarized that new media are becoming an increasingly important factor in political communication. Political competition and struggle between different political groups often cause serious tensions in society, with many manipulative content and techniques being used. That is why it is particularly important to know these new methods and the types of media that are used to understand and properly analyze political communication and action on the Internet. This is a key factor in developing tools and methods in order to protect ourselves from them, but also to enable, through civic involvement and support in society, constructive policies and tolerant political communication to have the main role and contribution. Finding solutions in this field is difficult without understanding the problems and their causes. The mass use of new technologies for creating and distributing information has a dual nature: on one hand, it is democratization in the exchange of information, but on the other hand, there are significant problems that disrupt the basic trust in the media systems.

The revolutionary impact of online media on journalism and society can be disputed in many aspects. Despite the great pluralization of information sources and publishing platforms, the problem of who will check and verify the information remains. Journalists and mass media, even in the age of online media, retain this important role, indicating that despite the decline in viewership and readership of the mainstream media, they still have a key role in the professional verification and credibility of information that has a major impact on public opinion.

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