MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN KOSOVO:
Hate and propaganda influences

Abit Hoxha

KOSOVO

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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CONTENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kosovo's media is arguably a very particular model based on its function and the role that journalists assign themselves. In 2004, the idea of media development was mainly focused on international aid. "The unprecedented development boom can be attributed to the circumstances created by liberation from the repressive Serbian regime, and to the support for new media that came from governmental and non-governmental donors that arrived in Kosovo/a after the war." (Berisha, 2004). However, in a research study, Andresen, Hoxha and Godole (2017) argue that the media model in Kosovo is unique and not a copycat with international influence. Journalists have similar roles in Macedonia, Serbia and Albania in the Balkans, where they feel part of the transition or change. In particular in Kosovo, they are assigned more of a role in proactively changing society. This is also reflected in the media model journalists, editors and ownership attempt to build. In his prominent work on the media in Kosovo (Andresen, 2015), Andresen argues that Kosovo's media history is mixed, starting from coexistence with the system in the communist times, builder of national identity in the 1990s and part of the nation-building strategy in post-war Kosovo. After the end of the war in 1999, the media in Kosovo turned from a clandestine to a more pluralistic media that somewhat resembles Western media. However, Kosovar journalists are still under considerable political pressure and often face intimidation (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019).

> After the end of the war in 1999, the media in Kosovo turned from a clandestine to a more pluralistic media that somewhat resembles Western media. However, Kosovar journalists are still under considerable political pressure and often face intimidation.

To deepen this argument, the last research carried out through the Worlds of Journalism Study[1] (WJS) found that Kosovar media are in weaker shape than reported, with more than two-thirds of journalists operating under temporary contracts and media barely surviving (Hoxha, et al., 2017). In a research piece published by *K2.0* in 2017, the author argues that something along the lines of the 'squeezing' of Kosovar journalism is happening among Kosovar media as

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[1] https://worldsofjournalism.org/

a result of political and economic interests in media ownership[2]. According to the Sage International Encyclopaedia of Mass Media and Society, the Kosovo media market remains overwhelmingly privately controlled. Furthermore, Kosovo did not experience development in stages from authoritative media via public service media to the private market but rather a collaboration of businessmen with politicians to create media agencies for the needs of political development (Andresen, 2015).

In recent years, Kosovo's media landscape has been enriched with new media and changes in ownership and editorial teams. Gazeta Express[3], the online portal with the largest number of views, widened its organization to include a television channel (T7), and the editor in chief of KTV, Adriatik Kelmendi took on the position of chief executive officer of Klan Kosova, a sister channel of Klan television in Albania. According to his interview on T7[4] on 9 April 2020, Baton Haxhiu resigned from his position of chief executive officer of Klan Kosova due to pressure from political actors and the ownership. Rrokum TV was sold to Arben Ahmeti by the former owner Migjen Kelmendi, who joined the Democratic Party of Kosova (PDK). Ahmeti then established Channel 10, which is still undergoing development. These developments mark something of a change in the media landscape in Kosovo which, despite the unclear political situation, continues to produce mostly political news, debates and other political media productions. The Media Sustainability Index rightly also claims that "the growth of the internet has paved the way for the increase in much smaller, more independent, and professional media outlets in recent years. These outlets have more journalists covering specific beats in a more in-depth manner" (Mehmetaj, 2019).

> Many social media users have been spreading fake news, propaganda and to some extent, hate in social media lately, knowing that there is little or no control over social media in Kosovo.

To complement recent changes in the Kosovo media landscape, social media usage by political leaders in political communication started to take a massive turn. As Prime Minister, Hashim Thaci was the first to hire a social media team with a professional presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter from 2008. In 2014, the Mustafa government followed the same patterns by not even appointing a government spokesperson, focusing on public communication, and communicated with journalists only via social media. Lately, in regard to the pandemic crisis, social media has been used mostly as a result of lockdown and isolation, making much information and disinformation spread wider than before. In an editorial piece published by the European Journalism Observatory[5], Dren Gerguri, a lecturer at the University of Prishtina, claims that much disinformation has happened during the pandemic situation, mostly through Facebook as the most used social network in Kosovo. To exacerbate the problem of disinformation, hate and propaganda, many social media users have been spreading fake news,

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2   https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Kosovo/Political-and-economic-interests-in-media-ownership-are-squeezing-Kosovar-journalism-179036

3   https://www.gazetaexpress.com/

4   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cDMlFd-8nI

5   https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/kosovo-coronavirus-and-the-media?fbclid=IwAR1sZRzX3jRChCvWwyekNgd9iVvvRbbnkQDGy2nj2e7ABuvfLyGkIiUP_-M

propaganda and to some extent, hate in social media lately, knowing that there is little or no control over social media in Kosovo. It is also alleged that to claim popularity political parties buy views of their political debates through social media farms abroad.

The media model that developed in Kosovo after 1999 leaves very little room for propaganda and less so for hate speech, in particular after March 2004, when the media reported that two children had drowned into the Ibër River because they had been chased by Serbs, and these reports were used as a starting point of a wider civil unrest. The OSCE in Kosovo confirmed in a report that "the clear spin given by the media in accounts of the fatal drowning of a group of children on 16 March seems to be unsupported by any journalistically valid accounts" (OSCE, 2004). Lessons learned from March 2004 and the media's role in civil disobedience and violence have been addressed in more traditional media such as RTK as the public broadcaster but also in private media. Media regulation in Kosovo through the Independent Media Commission is of a legal high standard and self-regulation of the press through the Kosovo Press Council is also well organized but there is room for improvement. In 2017, new measures were introduced, where members had to publish information regarding ownership in order to become a member of the Kosovo Press Council (Mehmetaj, 2019).

In terms of ownership of the traditional private media, little has changed from the data provided by Berisha in 2004 and even 2015. (Berisha, 2004, 2015). The private media remain under the same ownership, but more problems have surfaced with journalism and news production with the fading of international donors. Good practices of newsroom filers and routines have changed, and there is more censorship and self-censorship in the newsrooms as a result of political pressure. (Andresen et al., 2017; Hoxha, 2007; Hoxha & Andresen, 2019; Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017).

To date, the majority of national and regional (local) television broadcasters have formally transparent ownership; however, the real ownership is unknown or not confirmed. Businesses such as the Devolli Group are allegedly the real owners of *Klan Kosova,* although no documentation confirms that. The *Klan Kosova* Wikipedia page lists Aleksander Frangaj as the owner, whereas no information on ownership can be found on their web page. Similarly, *Gazeta Express* and the television broadcaster *T7* have no information about their ownership or editorial team on their web page. Other media houses are similar, apart from *RTK* as the public broadcaster and Koha, whose ownership is openly known, and *TV21*.

Similarly, other media have significant problems with ownership. The internet-based portal *Insajderi* is engaged in a feud with its alleged owners, and there is an ongoing investigation by the court[6].

As Kosovo has a unique media model that allows very little room for propaganda and hate speech in its media, this paper explores content in media and social media and how such content triggers hate commentary, propaganda and inappropriate rivalry on social media.

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6   *https://kallxo.com/ligji/video-ceshtja-insajderi-fillon-ballafaqimi-ne-gjykate/*

The director and editor in chief, who are also the owners on paper[7], claim that they have been attacked and that the ownership was changed without their knowledge by individuals close to Vetëvendosje!

As Kosovo has a unique media model that allows very little room for propaganda and hate speech in its media, this paper explores content in media and social media and how such content triggers hate commentary, propaganda and inappropriate rivalry on social media. It focuses on several mainstream media and a few handpicked Facebook groups and explains some of the significant irregularities. The reality is that these cases represent a larger pool of cases of disinformation and hateful propaganda. This work aims to create a better understanding of disinformation and hateful propaganda models of media and communication in Kosovo's media landscape.

1.1. Media landscape and formal regulation

Kosovo's media landscape comprises two levels: national media with national reach, and regional/local media with partial or specific reach within a region or town. According to the Independent Media Commission's[8] (IMC) 2018 report, Kosovo has 20 operational television stations, 83 radio stations, 41 distribution operators and 80 providers of audio-visual media services. Among these, there are 13 Albanian-language television broadcasters, including the public broadcaster, five Serbian-language television broadcasters and one that broadcasters in Turkish. Of the radio stations, 48 broadcast in Albanian, including two public radio stations, 23 in Serbian, three in the Bosniak language, three in Turkish, and two in Gorani. In terms of regulation, the Kosovo media is regulated by the Independent Media Commission and the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK). The IMC is an independent body for regulation, management and oversight of the broadcasting frequency spectrum. IMC regulates the rights, obligations and responsibilities of natural and legal persons that provide audio and audiovisual media services[9]. Also, the PCK is a self-regulating body for the press which includes some of the online media. For the PCK, freedom of speech, the right of citizens to be duly and completely informed and the respect for the Press Code of Kosovo are the foundations on which the Press Council is founded. The aim of the PCK is to protect the citizens from false information and the journalists from baseless complaints[10]. The PCK has 40 regular members from newspaper and news agencies, and three independent members. This is a self-regulating body that includes representatives of newspapers, news portals, magazines, news agencies and blogs, respectively its editors in chief[11].

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7   https://insajderi.com/dosja-olluri-kajtazi-pjesa-i-dokument-e-verteta-e-pronesise-se-insajderi-com-dhe-mashtrimi-qe-olluri-dhe-kajtazi-ia-bene-publikut/

8   https://www.kpm-ks.org/publikime/291/raporte-vjetore/291

9   http://www.kpm-ks.org/assets/cms/uploads/files/Legjislacioni/1335250709.2603.pdf

10   https://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/?lang=en

11   https://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/?lang=en

1.2.   The agenda-setting media landscape

Kosovo has a diverse media landscape, and most of its media are regional/local. The agenda-setting media sit in Prishtina, whereas the greater number of media outlets are based in the regions and municipalities. It is often thought that the concentration of media in Prishtina has created an epicentre of coverage neglecting regional developments which influence and shape political life in Kosovo, such as the Dukagjini, Drenica or Llapi regions. Often, content from the regions does not find itself in the national media.

The agenda-setting media in Kosovo is comprised of three or four main television channels. *RTK* remains one of the important television channels in Kosovo simply because of tradition. Lately, *KTV, T7* and *Klan Kosova* have increased viewer numbers due to their news and debate programmes. It is estimated that Kosovars still believe that television remains the most trusted source for news (NDI, 2019), although no scientific measurements take place. Most of the estimations come from the perception of citizens in other surveys[12]. *RTK* remains popular, but trust in it has declined in the last few years due to the political influence of the government and party politics. Its government-affiliated management is reflected in the content provided with mostly protocol news and sometimes also in line with party accusations. The national television broadcaster also has a channel with a separate budget, newsroom and management that broadcasts in Serbian.

KTV remains more of a traditional television broadcaster with a high standard of news. Among other agenda-setting media in Kosovo is *Gazeta Express* and its television brand *T7*. This is estimated as the most popular media outlet and portal due to its *celebritization* of news, including political news with gossip and, at times, speculation. The television channel is still underdeveloped, but at its peak, the portal has had some 800,000 views daily in the Balkans. *Express* is using all social media to distribute content and reach out to audiences and, together with *TV Dukagjini,* it is the newest media channel in Kosovo with growing influence. *Klan Kosova,* which has been in existence for about a decade, is a television channel with a good news programme but has recently been the subject of much political pressure.

Other types of agenda-setting media are online portals and web-based news organizations. *Insajderi* is one of the media that became increasingly popular with the publication of the "Pronto Affair"[13] and is becoming more influential with its work of late. *Telegrafi* was bought by a businessman who has close family ties with the owners of *TV Dukagjini. Lajmi.net* is a web-based portal with generic news but an increased readership because of non-

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12   https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20Public%20Opinion%20Poll%202019.pdf

13   The Pronto Affair is a series of stories published by Insajderi based upon the wiretapping of Kosovar politicians (mainly from the PDK) and government officials on corruption and other wrongdoings.

conflicting and non-sensationalist content. *Reporteri* is a newly established portal with experienced journalists who found themselves unable to conform with media ownership and influence elsewhere.

Besides the abovementioned agenda-setting media, Kosovo has a phenomenon of non-governmental media as in many places in the world. *BIRN, Kosovo 2.0,* and *Prishtina Insight* are only some of the media outlets that are registered as non-governmental organizations and provide qualitative content in the public sphere. Together with these "NGO-media", Kosovo has some smaller and regional minority media such as *Kosovo Sever Portal, Radio KiM* and *Crno I Beli Svet* which produce content for their audience despite their popularity remaining low.

Despite the fact that by law parties are not granted licences from the Independent Media Commission, a new, emerging field of development in Kosovo are the political party television channels. Vetëvendosje announced the creation of a television channel to "reach out to citizens[14]" through their former Minister of Justice. The European Federation of Journalists reacted to this action with a tweet saying "This is not journalism. This is propaganda in the service of politicians", a statement that the Association of Journalists of Kosovo supported. This sparked a social media frenzy, and civil society reacted along with the Kosovo Independent Media Commission. After much reaction, Vetëvendosje clarified that this would only be a YouTube channel, transmitting interviews, adverts and other materials produced by the party.

1.3.   Social media networks

Besides well-established media and other organizations with the functional equivalence of media, Kosovo has one of the highest penetrations of internet use in the region with 86.49% according to the IPSOS Media Diary. In comparison, the share of mobile phone users exceeds 96% of the population and inevitably, social media networks play a critical role. Social media networks are also very popular in Kosovo among political leaders, parties, and overall communication channels. For a couple of years, Mustafa´s government (2014–2017) only communicated with the public via *Facebook* and the last coalition government was negotiated through *Facebook* by publishing details even before new developments reached the other party in the negotiations. Similarly, political parties, organizations and individuals with influence use mainly Facebook to communicate. The media also has a very high presence in social media networks (Shanini-Hoxhaj, 2018). A report of Kosovo 2.0 in 2019 found that "the presence of social media has intensified communication between institutional representatives and the public in general and has brought the two parties closer to one another, this communication remains

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14   https://safejournalists.net/agk-e-pranon-me-shqetesim-hapjen-e-televizionit-tvv-nga-subjekti-politik-i-levizjes-vetevendosje/

one sided and not open to genuine challenge. Social media has facilitated quick communication between institutional representatives and the public, but has simultaneously made the work of journalists more difficult, because statements addressed on social media are often used as justifications by institutional representatives for refusing to be publicly challenged in regard to different issues of public interest" (Kosovo 2.0, 2018).

FOLLOWERS OF THE TOP 5 MEDIA ON FACEBOOK IN KOSOVO
Table 1

	MEDIA	FOLLOWERS
1.	EXPRESS	1.2 million
2.	LAJMI	882,799
3.	TELEGRAFI	813,230
4.	KLAN KOSOVA	580,765
5.	KOHA.net	554,498

Source: Social Bakers[15]

Inevitably, this leads to a lot of content produced as propaganda and with hate nuances to be distributed via social networks. Several groups with nationalistic content exist in Facebook where hate content can be traced in comments sections and posts by individuals, although this content seldom ends up in the media.

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[15]   *https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/kosovo*

2. PROPAGANDA, HATE AND OTHER INFLAMMATORY CONTENT IN THE KOSOVAR MEDIA

It is not easy to identify straightforward hate speech and propaganda in the Kosovar media but the language framing ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and women remains problematic. The Cambridge Dictionary defines hate speech as "public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation" and in this context, content produced in the media rarely represents hate speech. Even anonymous media portals try to imitate professional journalists by not producing hateful and abusive content. Journalists not only refrain from using hateful and abusive language but continue to collaborate in reporting and informing the public in various forms, especially between Serbia and Kosovo.

Despite the intense feeling of divided communities in Kosovo, and between Kosovo and Serbia, journalists have managed to break down barriers and collaborate in improving the representation of the other sides in their reporting.

In the Kosovar social media networks, however, content that can fall under this category does emerge in the comments sections. Media often deliberately close comments sections due to abusive content and hate speech. Despite the intense feeling of divided communities in Kosovo, and between Kosovo and Serbia, journalists have managed to break down barriers and collaborate in improving the representation of the other sides in their reporting. Research from 2019 on interactions between Kosovar and Serbian journalists finds that collaboration of Kosovar journalists with their Serbian counterparts is better than previously thought. Exchange programmes and projects mainly pushed by international NGO organizations have proven to be very successful. They use these initiatives to reach audiences on the opposite side. (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019).

2.1. Propaganda and hate in social media

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, propaganda content in the truest definition of the term is content, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view. Naturally, such content in Kosovo comes from the government and political parties mostly through the media. Looking closely at the news content produced by RTK, one can see the lack of a critical perspective in the content of their news, debates and even stories produced in relation to the dialogue of Kosovo with Serbia (Shahini – Hoxhaj, 2018), the issues of European integration, the so-called pro and anti-American polarization and also domestic politics.

As a public broadcaster, RTK often is accused of bias in content regarding the views of the government and opposition. The opposition has its ways of transmitting news and making headlines as well. With its publications

and strategic communication through social networks, the Vetëvendosje movement, in particular, shows signs of propagating content to suit its political aims. The content is also mostly related to issues of negotiations of Kosovo with Serbia, demarcation of the border with Montenegro (2017–18), and the "Association of Serb Municipalities" in northern Kosovo. Such communication has created the conditions for signs of hate speech in public communication after such saturation of the debate. These hate messages do not get published in the press but are instead part of the social media debates and discussions throughout Facebook.

The Kosovar media often falls under the influence of sensationalizing the news and the desire to be the first to post news on social media. By sensationalizing the news, stories often go unfiltered and unedited but end up going viral by local standards. By the time the news gets verified and checked, it is too late and there are consequences. On such occasions, inappropriate content seldom ends up in the media. On one occasion, the Independent Media Commission had to draw attention to the media coverage of a story about a woman abused by a minor[16] because it was in conflict with the Code of Ethics[17] but what the IMC did not address in its reaction was the issue of such news circulating online was indicating her ethnicity and gender identity, reporting her as a transwoman, which contributed to the attack on her.

> Most of the propaganda in social media originates from political organizations and content related to either government or opposition parties' actions. Social media users share and comment on offensive and hateful content from real and anonymous sources.

Social media content does not follow standard journalism practices of editing and confirmation of sources. Often, less or no filter is applied in reporting. Most of the propaganda in social media originates from political organizations and content related to either government or opposition parties' actions. Social media users share and comment on offensive and hateful content from real and anonymous sources. According to Facebook, in 2019, Facebook removed 212 Facebook pages, groups and accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour that originated in Macedonia and Kosovo were removed. The individuals behind this activity operated fake accounts to administer Facebook pages sharing general, non-country-specific content like astrology, celebrities and beauty tips.[18] Unfortunately, Facebook does not monitor hate content and propaganda in Albanian and Serbian in the comments sections and has not been able to do much about hate and propaganda so far.

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16   http://kpm-ks.org/al/lajmi_i_plot/3065
17   Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in the Republic of Kosovo. IMC-2016/03. Accessed in: https://www.kpm-ks.org/en/legjislacioni/299/aktet-nenligjore-ne-fuqi/299
18   https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/cib-iran-russia-macedonia-kosovo/

3. CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR THE PROPAGANDA AND HATE CONTENT WAR IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Content in social media networks is difficult to control. The way content is spread in Facebook groups in Kosovo-based political communication is that text is often within the Community Standards[19]. Facebook has been criticized before on the issue of free speech[20] and for restricting the same "on popular demand"[21] without verification of information. Facebook pages in Kosovo operate in such a way that most of the controversial content is not textual in the original posts but is in video format instead, without the possibility of being automatically identified as hate or propaganda. Often, it is also linked from web portals, which can be removed, but the content remains in the original link in the portal.

The way Facebook groups spread propaganda which motivates hate comments is that these groups share content produced on other pages and videos that are linked to YouTube. These videos are edited in an amateur form and are short. The information is very difficult to verify and confirm, but the comments section provides an opportunity for discussion and expression of hate content. Often, pages that are officially managed by political parties spread such content from unverified sources or content doctored to suit their needs. Members of such pages follow these groups and news in these groups because of such unfiltered content. Besides this, such content is provided by influential members of the groups such as lower rank party officials, prominent political figures and even members of parliament. This makes such content in social networks more credible in the eyes of the audience, but is not verified, filtered or curated by any media.

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The Facebook page #meKryeministrin, for example, was created in support of Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister of Kosovo. In the description, it says that it is "created by responsible citizens who are aware of the political situation in the country. Here we offer our support for Albin Kurti and the work of the Kurti government".[22] This group numbers some 315,500 members. The page *#ndalDezinformatat[23]* is similar, but this one has only a little more than 5000 members who are invited to counter the alleged disinformation of the media in Kosovo. The group banner is hashtagged with "stop disinformation" and calls for the boycotting of the media in Kosovo to "counter the disinformation campaign and particular war against the elected prime minister and democracy" in Kosovo. The group's banner names and shames various

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19   https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction/

20   https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/facebook-and-the-free-speech-excuse

21   https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/facebook-restricts-free-speech-popular-demand/598462/

22   *Partial description of the Facebook group #meKryeministrin in Albanian (*https://www.facebook.com/groups/514061489305891/about*)*

23   https://www.facebook.com/groups/142926237142890

13

media for "abandoning professional neutrality and opening up targeted fire against the democratically elected prime minister", marking out media in the list as siding with the '*putschists*', which is a term cultivated by Kurti`s party to explain the March 2020 vote of no confidence in his government[24]. Additionally, the hashtag "*#meKryeministrin*" is adopted in the description of this Facebook group, which indicates that fans of Kurti created this group.

When thoroughly observed, the posts in these two main groups comprise content that is circulating in other media. Articles published by other media are discussed here with a commentary by the administrators or members posting them. The comments section is longer, often exceeding hundreds of comments, and when the posts contain negative information about the former government of Kurti, there is an outbreak of comments containing hate speech and inappropriate use of language. What is interesting is that the group #ndaldezinformatat is administered from Sweden and Kosovo.

Picture 1: The banner used in the Facebook group #ndaldezinformatat names and shames various media for not supporting the Kurti government

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24   https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/25/no-confidence-vote-topples-kurti-govt-in-kosovo/

4.   RIVALRY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In the comments section of posts in Facebook groups, problematic language is used. Ethnic slurs and hate messages are directed towards subjects of content by calling them names, referring to ethnic identity and sexual orientation. There have been a few cases of comments in which the subjects of content on Albanian ethnic belonging were called 'shka[25]' or 'maxhup[26]' with the aim to offend them. There is very little administration of comments in such groups, as observed in at least three of them[27], although these groups are managed typically by skilled administrators who also support the political cause and proactively participate in demonstrations against the opposing party[28]. These administrators fail to see or prevent propaganda items, hate speech and other problematic language used in their groups. On some occasions, they have been known to post fake news about political opponents as well, in which cases, legal action was taken against them. On 13 July, at the Kosovo Police, Ganimete Musliu, an MP of the Kosovo Democratic Party, denounced an administrator of two Facebook pages for spreading fake news about her health and public health[29]. The administrator of these two Facebook pages was allegedly the brother of an MP from Vetëvendosje. Later, the police confirmed that it was impossible to see who the administrator of these two Facebook groups is and Fitim Pacolli, who was accused, announced on his Facebook page that he would sue Ganimete Musliu for defamation[30].

Ethnic slurs and hate messages are directed towards subjects of content by calling them names, referring to ethnic identity and sexual orientation. There have been a few cases of comments in which the subjects of content on Albanian ethnic belonging were called 'shka ' or 'maxhup ' with the aim to offend them.

How this rivalry is orchestrated and manifested on social media was also illustrated with the attacks against Andi Haxhiu[31] in March 2019. Andi Haxhiu, a student at Edinburgh University, was a student in Kosovo in 2017 and completing a simulation exercise for his Information and Communication Policy class when he opened a Twitter account in his name. To sound more authentic, he used the description "advisor to the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation for the Danchuana[32] region", because that was the task assigned to him by his course leader. On the morning of 23 March 2019, Haxhiu woke up to thousands of messages and hate mails in his inbox and social media account but also with articles in the media covering the story of how "the son of prominent journalist Baton Haxhiu is an advisor working

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25   *Derogatory term used for Serbs by mostly Albanians in Kosovo*

26   *Derogatory terms used for Roma people by mostly Albanians in Kosovo*

27   *The author joined these Facebook groups to look for content with hate language and propaganda items.*

28   *Veron Hasani, who interrupted the President`s press conference calling him a thief, is an administrator of the page #meKryeministrin which supports Albin Kurti*

29   *https://www.facebook.com/ganimete.musliu.9/posts/10158334376743006*

30   *http://www.arbresh.info/lajmet/vellau-i-fitore-pacolli-ngrite-padi-ndaj-ganimete-musliut-per-shpifje-ndaj-tij/?fbclid=IwAR1asX3VTuAGEh406Jft-y4eipaUUXHwr9mN-GwJPkRUcaPAx6cH3SMN93g*

31   *Interview with Andi Haxhiu (15 July 2020)*

32   *The Danchuana region is an imaginary place which served the purpose of a class simulation exercise for Andi Haxhiu*

for Russia". Particular attention was given to his father´s role as a journalist and activist during the war in Kosovo. Andi Haxhiu followed the trail of the news sources and came to the Facebook post of a professor of Political Science from the University of Tirana who had been a supporter and member of Vetëvendosje (he later became a political advisor to Kurti in Prishtina) who had misconstrued the Twitter handle and purpose, although it was clearly marked as RIT Kosovo simulation. Hysamedin Feraj and Enver Bytyqi posted long stories about how a 23-year-old spy from Kosovo was working for Russia. The web portal Bota Sot in Kosovo used these Facebook posts as a source of news from which to produce a story on Andi Haxhiu and tie this to his father as well. Thousands of items of hate mail calling him and his father a spy and claiming that the business of spying ran in his family came to Andi´s address, which appeared in the print media and in social media posts. Not only have Feraj and Bytyqi, along with many others, not apologized to Andi Haxhiu but to date they have not expressed regret for having spread hate and fake news either.

Arberije Nagavci,[33] a member of the Presidency of the Kosovo National Assembly from Vetëvendosje, has also been the subject of these campaigns of organized hate comments. She says that "Social media are truly becoming an arena for political clashes and enable low attacks with the aim of denigration of particular people." Her experience with this is generic, but in particular, she mentions the threatening post made by a PDK member of the General Council and former deputy minister Gani Koci. He posted a status on his personal Facebook account where he threatened journalists[34] by saying: "The time has come not to disinfect, but to close these Serbian septic tanks that remain in Kosovo. They really stink", explicitly naming some journalists[35] and members of civil society. The Association of Journalists of Kosovo condemned the language used by Koci as an "an attack on freedom of expression. "[36] Koci is under investigation by the police [37] for his Facebook post. Nagavci says that "generally, comments are orchestrated by political opponents. In my case, the posts on which I received insulting comments are those where I address political issues. I have also seen that in news posted by portals where I have declarations, there is insulting commentary."

Another example of public hate speech is the case of Vetëvendosje MP, Fatmire Mulhaxha-Kollqaku, who was of the target of hate speech comments for her Facebook posts in February 2020. In a remark about the former Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti, Mulhaxha-Kollqaku used a quote of an analyst from a Serbian television who claimed that it was difficult for Serbia to deal with Kurti because "Kurti does not have a criminal file from the KLA." Her quote was used in social media by her opponents, mainly by the Kosovo

33   Interview with Arberie Nagavci (16 July 2020)

34   https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/kosovo-politician-threatens-birn-country-director/

35   https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/kosovo-politician-threatens-birn-country-director/

36   https://safejournalists.net/agk-e-denon-ashper-gjuhen-e-perdorur-nga-zyrtari-i-larte-i-pdk-se-gani-koci-ne-drejtim-te-gazetares-jeta-xharra/

37   https://www.botasot.info/aktuale-lajme/1326323/policia-nis-hetimet-ndaj-gani-kocit-per-gjuhen-lincuese/

Democratic League (LDK) and Kosovo Democratic Party (PDK), to attack her as a "Serb-sympathizer" and "half-Serb", also indicating that she is the offspring of a mixed marriage with an Albanian father and a Serb mother. Personal information about her parents and their ethnic background[38] was published on Facebook after she had posted a Facebook status. A photograph of her birth certificate showing the names of her mother and grandparents was presented as evidence supporting the accusation that she had collaborated with Serbs. The names on the birth certificate reveal the ethnicity of her grandparents and mother. However, Mulhaxha-Kollqaku explained that her statement was misinterpreted[39], no action was taken, and the posts with hate speech and inappropriate language were never removed from social networks.

Cases like this have happened in the past as well, especially against public figures. While he was an MP in 2017, former MP Ilir Deda faced thousands of comments of a similar nature after a public attempt of the ruling parties to dismiss the Special Court. Zafir Berisha, an MP from the government coalition in 2017, insulted him by calling him "Belgrade`s nephew" on Facebook, connotating the ethnic belonging of Deda´s mother. Thousands of hate comments emerged against Deda at the time on social media and in comments on news items on social networks.

5. GENDER IN MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA AND HATE AND ABUSIVE CONTENT

Although the mainstream media in Kosovo stand well in not allowing hateful content, gender issues are rarely considered. Women are rarely seen on panels or engaging in political debate, and gender issues are even more rarely discussed. Although the journalist population in Kosovo is 45.5% female (Hoxha et al., 2016), most of the content in the Kosovo media is male-dominated in almost all news beats. Exceptions are evident only when sexual violence as a result of war is covered but, in this subject, too, there is evidence of hateful and abusive commenting online against interviewees and women who speak openly about sexual violence. Although journalists have a good knowledge of privacy and the responsibility for anonymization of such sources, the commentaries in social media are general but hateful.

Women are rarely seen on panels or engaging in political debate, and gender issues are even more rarely discussed.

Politically based gender-based hate content is also launched in social networks. Many female MPs and political activists face hate comments and abusive content for their political actions. Gender-based hate content, including ethnic hate, has been seen in at least two cases where hateful comments were directed at the children of mixed marriages, attacking family members with abusive language.

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38   https://lajmi.net/djali-i-deshmorit-thote-se-fatmire-kollcaku-eshte-e-bija-e-nje-serbe/
39   https://kosova.info/cfare-gaboje-deputetja-mulhaxha-kollqaku-ndaj-kryeministrit-kurti/

6. GROUNDS FOR HATE SPEECH AND INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Kosovo's education system is weak and unable to address new technological developments in communication and media development. Additionally, education in Kosovo does not correspond with the exposure of pupils of primary and secondary education to the media and social networks. Kosovo scored as one of the lowest-ranked countries where the "mean score in reading performance is one of the lowest among PISA-participating countries and economies[40]."

According to Gentiane Pacarizi[41], an assistant at the University of Prishtina working on the Media Management course, hate speech is a part of the wider culture. "It is seen vividly in citizens' views and manifested through social media when something important happens. In Kosovo, there is constant polarization in society, and this is reflected in social media." She claims that it is difficult to improve this situation without better education. In a broader sense, she says that the actions that are needed to improve this situation are hidden in the systematic failure of education to address the development of critical thought, tolerance and good understanding. Addressing these issues through education is the key to minimizing hate speech on social networks.

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Similarly, media expert Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi[42] claims that key to addressing hate speech and inappropriate language in comments is not only education but also a practice that has emerged in Kosovo during last two decades. She says that "first, the authorities only react when it comes to high profile cases, and second, weak education has made people feel no responsibility for the consequences of hate speech." She compares the penetration of the internet, along with the high number of users of social media with the possibility of using hate speech online. She also makes a case for more public engagement through training, seminars and educational opportunities for the younger generation in the field of media and information literacy and social networks.

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40   https://gpseducation.oecd.orgCountryProfile?plotter=h5&primaryCountry=XKO&treshold=10&topic=PI
41   Interview with Gentiana Pacarizi (16 July 2020).
42   Interview with Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi (17 July 2020).

18

7. FIGHTING DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2020, the spread of disinformation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic situation motivated many actors to fight disinformation appearing on social networks. Mentor Hoxhaj[43], a former official of the Kosovo Government Agency on Data Protection, started a company based on an initiative to collaborate with Facebook to remove disinformation and hate content that could cause harm in many ways. Since 14 March 2020, Hoxhaj`s Cybersecurity and Privacy (CSP)[44], in collaboration with Facebook, has been reviewing and reporting to Facebook content, stories and even comments comprising hate speech in Albanian, and often also in Serbian, in order to have it removed from the network. The #FactCheckerKosovo initiative also has a Facebook page where they publicly expose this content through screenshots and short news articles from the media and social media after they have fact-checked it and reported it to Facebook. Hoxhaj says that he plans to widen activity in fighting general disinformation and particularly gender-based discriminatory language, hate speech, cyberbullying and other forms of abuse online.

> Kosovo's education system is weak and unable to address new technological developments in communication and media development.

8. CONCLUSIONS

After the war in Kosovo, many international organizations rushed into Kosovo to work with media development, knowing that an independent and free media is one of the pillars of a democratic society. The March 2004 violence served to confirm that the media has a more prominent role in the post-conflict society but also needs to develop hand in hand with society and democracy. RTK was urged to spend significant sums on further training for staff, and private media organizations were asked to do the same. As a result, Kosovo's media has learned the lesson of hate speech in reporting.

The Kosovar media model built upon the media as a national identity builder, conflict reporting and substantial international intervention with funding for the professionalization of journalists leaves no room for the presence of hate speech. However, with social media and the democratization of communication where commentaries on news and media productions are possible, there is an increasing trend of hate speech and propaganda in social media. Despite this being mostly in the comments sections, prompt action must be taken.

The Kosovar media landscape is diverse on two levels The first and perhaps more important, is the national media, which consists of the agenda-setting

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43   Interview with Mentor Hoxhaj, initiator and Project Manager of #FactCheckerKosovo (14 July 2020).
44   https://www.cybersecurity-privacy.com/

media which operate in a challenging environment squeezed between the economic influence of their owners along with the family-oriented ownership, on the one hand, and the political environment on the other. The second level is the local media in Kosovo, which is an overcrowded market. Almost every municipality has a local radio station and sometimes several. Some local media operate in minority languages, and that makes the media model more diverse but harder to monitor. Generally, Kosovo's media face financial difficulties and journalists face tough choices of short-term contracts, low wages, censorship and self-censorship.

Kosovo's media face financial difficulties and journalists face tough choices of short-term contracts, low wages, censorship and self-censorship.

Another sphere where disinformation and hate are uncontrolled and without restrictions is the social media and online sphere. Some of the media portals are a one-man show, without the filters of news production and they spread disinformation and sometimes also hate content. Above all, one can see also discriminatory language towards women, and gender hate speech is increasing.

In combination with ethnic slurs, gender-based hate speech is directed against individuals and families of mixed marriages because of political engagement. It shows that comments are mostly made because of public political stands and beliefs and less so because of ethnically mixed marriages.

Some of the steps to be taken in Kosovo to address hate speech in social media should include media and information education. Addressing critical thinking, open discussion, tolerance and difference in opinion should start as early as primary and secondary school. This should be addressed by the institutions in charge of education curricula. Pupils should be introduced to the subject with courses on social media and digital media because they are already exposed to such media as early as in the pre-school period. Thus far, it is seen that there is a lack of coordination between the education system, that would provide media and information literacy and the non-governmental sector, but also with the private sector, of fighting propaganda and fake news in social media and state institutions.

The good news for the professional media in Kosovo is that hate speech in Kosovo's media content is almost non-existent in the case of professional media productions, but the bad news is that most of the offensive content and hate speech in Kosovo is disseminated in non-regulated platforms such as social media. Derogatory hate speech words can be found in Facebook posts, tweets and other comments in media stories. A recent fact-checking initiative to collaborate with Facebook to remove disinformation content, hate speech and abusive commentary is a very welcome development for Kosovo.

9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• Regarding media and information literacy, the Kosovo Government and relevant education institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, should urgently introduce subjects that will be taught in school to provide better understanding of the media and information literacy.

• Kosovo's education institutions should increase the teaching of critical thinking and the online sphere to improve inflammatory language and inappropriate ethnic slurs in the online space.

• Self-regulation bodies should hold discussions with their members and urge them to take action in the comments sections of their online media, social media and networks when it appears.

• Media organizations should increase their fact-checking mechanisms/ newsrooms and remind journalists of the Code of Ethics more often.

• The media should have regular sessions with journalists to speak about and discuss hate speech, inappropriate language and ethnic slurs in order to prevent them appearing in content, comments and other communication.

• The media should collaborate more with the fact-checking institutions and non-governmental organizations in countering hate speech.

• The media should create anti-hate, anti-propaganda coalitions to fight inflammatory language in political communication.

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22

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Abit Hoxha is a researcher at the Institute of Nordic and Media Studies at the University of Agder in Norway. He is currently working on his Ph.D. titled Conflict News Production at LMU Munich, Germany where he is focusing on comparing journalistic news production in Western Balkans, Middle East, and Great Lakes through reconstructing news coverage with journalists to find out influences on news production and how news comes into being. He holds an MSc from Durham Global Security Institute at Durham University in the UK as well as an MA on Journalism from the Kosovo Institute of Journalism and Communication and BA degree in Political Science from the University of Prishtina. Abit is engaged in both academic discussions and research of transitional societies as well as in training journalists on sensitive reporting.

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