



Research Article

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Higher Education in Kosovo: Media Coverage and the Challenges

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Abstract

The purpose of this research work was to approach higher education in Kosovo from the viewpoint of both print and electronic media coverage, as well as to point out the challenges derived from the current practice. The paper addresses the impact of media on higher education promotion and development, in addition to quality improvement. Furthermore, it aims to generate discussion on how media coverage of higher education can positively contribute to its development, including impact on wider society. Media's role in public information, its attitude in relation to educational reforms, and society's awareness on changing needs have been analyzed thoroughly. In addition, the challenges faced by higher education institutions and its coverage by media were analyzed. The research was conducted with a structure and methodology based on theoretical, empirical findings, and discussion on education and media. The main finding is that media provide adequate coverage of events and information primarily in the negative context, with very little attention paid to good practices and more positive messages. Further, the research suggests that education in general and higher education in particular, is closely linked and affected by politics. On the other hand, there is a lack of professionalism in the journalist profession, particularly amongst those dealing with educational issues in general and higher education in particular. Electronic media coverage in many cases is considered disproportionate towards certain groups. Thus, both sides media and HE institutions are critical of each other and there is clear mistrust and lack of cooperation.

Keywords: Higher education, quality improvement, print media, electronic media, public opinion

1. Introduction

The society in its development structure has considered education as the most important factor on building up its own future. It is education that gives humans the value and the merited position

within each developed society, by integrating and enabling professional and intellectual activity and also by adapting to the surrounding world and the trends of everlasting changes.

The rapid global changes in the economic, technical, and technological (entering in the Industry 4.0 era on global level) aspects have made media the most important tool for quicker information on events, progress, or even the negative aspects in each field. Their power and importance is indisputable, therefore they influence both- the policy-makers' and the decision-makers in each democratic society.

1.1 The Role and the Influence of Media in Society

Global changes in economy and other fields have made media the most important tool for quicker information on the progress and related challenges. Nowadays, media are considered the strongest cultural industries in communications (Campbell, et. al, 2010), Through them, news, educational programs, various columns, etc., are transmitted to their viewers or readers. Such a description is provided by Wimmer and Dominick (2013) who define media as a communication line that reaches a large number of people.

Media, either print or electronic, is considered the source of information for the society and the environment they serve. The role of the media is best defined by Preeti (2014) as follows:

- Provides general information, meaning providing it quickly;
- Provides professional information: the community whatever it be and wherever, is not excluded from receiving such information;
- Raises awareness and civic responsibility: the challenges and problems that the society faces, both in terms of economic, educational, developmental, etc., reach the society via media, whereby the role of that society is to fight, overcome, or change those phenomena for community's good, and
- Provides educational programs: there is no doubt that media plays a significant role in shaping a society. Thus, through educational programs, media affects the society towards productivity.

Vivian (2012) provides a definition on media claiming that media are so integrated in the social life on daily basis to the extent that people cannot escape from them. In this context, it is worthy to emphasize that approximately one third of the time spent by people near the media involves simultaneous contact with two or more other media (Vivian, 2012). For example, reading of a newspaper, watching television, with an ear turned to the radio, while simultaneously surfing the internet. Based on these descriptions, it can be said that media (either print or electronic) communicate with society, thus providing the latter with various information and news without excluding the course of education of that society and beyond.

Each society considers education to be the most important thing for its future. It is precisely the education that gives man value and the deserved position. It integrates people not only in the society where they live and work, but also beyond it. When talking about education, Neveanu (1979) argues that education is, *"a social phenomenon of society's formation, training and development as a subject of action, knowledge and values through communication and practice, thus modeling their behavior and integrating them into business and social relationships."*

Education as a key pillar in building up a society is devoted attention everywhere. This is done by approaching it from different angles and perspectives, often reflecting the prevalent reality but sometimes by distorting it. Not all social and state mechanisms when accessing to education have the same common approach because some of them do play a key role and are extremely positive in its development, whereas the others only explore failures, having a tendency to reflect the situation in the education sector pessimistically.

Nowadays, media is considered the most powerful voice for communication, be it print or electronic. The available data emphasize that the news media influence is deeper than simply

informing (Coe and Kuttner (2018) whereas sometimes the media coverage of the education tends to be superficial (Moses & Saenz, 2008), emphasizing some perspectives over others (Tamir & Davidson, 2011), privileging of some discourses (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2014), oversimplification of the complex issues (Wallace, 1993) etc..

Beside concerns that reporting is sometimes inadequate (unfair, incomplete etc.), the media are a vital source of information for the public, therefore, improvements in this regard are needed (Levin, 2004). Hence, the fair approach of media to things in general, and education in particular, would positively contribute to the process and development of the latter.

1.2 Higher Education and Media in Kosovo

Higher education in post-war Kosovo was subjected to the impact of rapid and profound changes of political, economic, and social circumstances with the urgent need to build up legal and institutional mechanisms under new conditions. Under these circumstances, the uncontrolled establishment of many public and private Higher Education Institutions within a short period of time, without good preliminary preparation and with limited resources (infrastructure, staff, finance) has significantly undermined the quality in higher education.

The higher education policies of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kosovo (MEST) have not provided the expected results in increasing the education quality and the public confidence in the academic and scientific community. These policies have not resulted in expected public and economical credibility in human resources and industry expectations in terms of workforce readiness and innovation potential (Gojani, 2019).

The Kosovo Accreditation Agency's tendency to accredit a numerous higher education programmes and institutions in a relatively short time, in the Kosovo context with small population in numbers and a small geographic territory, has had an impact on quantity rather than quality (Gojani, 2019)

Kosovo's failure to participate (due to political reasons) in the EU's 'Bologna Process', have negatively affected the implementation of reforms in higher education and has influenced Kosovo's access to the European Higher Education Area. The difficulties in accessing and implementing of international projects for higher education has led to the reduction of the impact of projects on the course of educational reforms and the achievement of targeted aims (Gojani, 2019).

Under these circumstances, media as the most important means of public information have served the wide public with various news and information, often not being aware of the impact they have created on public opinion. Kosovan media in the new post-war circumstances of 1999 have been subjected to the impact of the rapid and profound changes of political, economic, and social circumstances. This happened under the enthusiasm of being free after many years of occupation, political influence and censorship. The period of the rapid growth of Media was characterized with a lack of a good legal infrastructure, with a shortage of professional staff, and with a lack of experience of acting under new circumstances. On the other hand, they have also been challenged with the trends of media technology development and the lack of resources to bring new technologies and the development of expertise to use these technologies.

All of these, led media to face professional shortcomings in their work and oscillation of public confidence from one media to another.

1.3 The aim of the study

The motives for conducting such a research are numerous, but the most important ones are related to the rapid technological developments and their influence in everyday life. The new technology has enabled quick and almost unlimited access to various (often untrue and untrustworthy) information. The level of available information in one unit of time and the speed of information spread have increased rapidly. This doesn't mean that the knowledge has been developed at the same pace. In

fact, this has contributed to fake information spread from unreliable sources. Industry 4.0 enabled creation of new media channels, i.e. social media. Therefore, the world of media has even greater responsibility.

The aim of the current paper was to determine the impact of media on higher education promotion and development, including its quality improvement. It further aims at encouraging an opinion in favor of boosting positive changes in education and society.

This research addressed the following research questions:

- How do printed and electronic media deal with the higher education in Kosovo?
- What is the impact of media on developing and improving the quality of higher education in Kosovo?
- How have the media generated a positive opinion for promoting educational reforms and promoted the awareness of society in favor of these changes by way of good practice?

With full respect to freedom of journalism the purpose of this paper is to contribute to overall positive development and enable environment for positive changes. We have to have in mind that media with their approach are contributed in discovering bad practices and impacted the positive changes, which is leading us to the next step needed with actions proposed above.

2. Methodology

The current research comprised of interviews with heads of media, MEST officials, and education experts. The choice for the research analysis of the three largest print media (*"Koha Ditore"*, *"Kosova Sot"*, and *"Zëri"*) was based on their readability, while the two online portals (Express and Telegraph) were chosen based on the visibility and readability. The interviews were conducted with the heads of print newspapers and online portals. Finally, interviews with a MEST official and a higher education expert were conducted based on their experience in the field of higher education.

The research was conducted through combined methods, comprising empirical research and interviews, because it was considered the most appropriate way. The data were obtained, examined and developed as following:

- The newspapers (*"Koha Ditore"*, *"Kosova Sot"*, and *"Zëri"*) were researched and examined for the months of May, June, August, September, and October during 2013, 2014, 2015, and the months of April, May and June 2016, in order to find out the coverage rate of higher education issues, their topics, and their importance to the public.
- The electronic print media (*"Express"* and *"Telegrafi"*) were surfed and browsed during 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 to find out the coverage rate of higher education issues, the topics that have been addressed, and their importance to the public – their contribution toward a positive opinion for promoting educational reforms and the awareness of society in favor of these changes.
- The interviews were conducted with two print media heads. Their perceptions on addressing higher education in media were important.
- The interviews were conducted with a MEST official and an education expert for viewpoints on higher education in terms of print media in Kosovo.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Coverage of Higher Education by the Kosovan Media

In the context of print media, 87 higher education articles published 2016-2020 were analyzed. The research results are quite discouraging in terms of addressing higher education, where about 3/4 of the columns represent a highly negative aspect or 74%, while only 5% of the analyzed articles represent a positive outlook for higher education. Slightly more than 1/5 (21%) of the articles written

in these newspapers provide neutral information, as they inform about administrative events, announcements for student enrollment or ordinary activities at higher education institutions.

It is quite interesting that even electronic media (*“Express”* and *“Telegrafi”*) do not differ much regarding the approach toward higher education over the five years. Out of 100 articles examined and analyzed in the same timeframe as above, 70% provide a very negative picture of higher education in Kosovo, with 20% of articles providing neutral information, announcements, information on common management or organization of the activities of higher education institutions. On the other hand, in print media only 5% of the information had a positive connotation. In relation to the portals, there are many more positivist/optimistic articles on higher education or 10% of the total analyzed articles.

Since trends in media development are increasingly less print media and the rapid development of electronic media, which is happening in Kosovo, information on higher education is being launched in real time and the presence of articles related to higher education has increased within the electronic media. The fact that e-portals have more positive news for education does not have much to do with the tendency of better coverage of education. Rather, it has to do with the opportunities that have been arisen for higher education institutions to promote their work and activities in their websites and social networks. In a way, this opinion is indirectly confirmed by media and education experts during the interviews.

There is a clear indication that education in Kosovan electronic media in general and print ones in particular is not adequately presented. There is a tendency to provide more negative topics which the reader and the audience read just to overcome the curiosity. The topics that really need to be provided and dealt with (which consequently generate active encouragement and stimulation in improving quality) are not given enough space. The focus on such topics, which are mostly written for marketing of the certain newspapers, has created stereotypes in Kosovo society. Therefore, negative perceptions have been created for educational institutions (by media focusing particularly on problems and scandals). Of course, it can't be claimed that higher education in Kosovo is without its challenges but the impression that nothing positive takes ever place in this level of education is not the right one. Actually, there is a need for more focus on presenting and exploring good examples and positive initiatives for quality improvement. Not covering the higher education in the context of quality, and addressing the weaknesses and negative sides only, has pushed the public opinion to create an opinion that the situation in higher education is getting worse and there are no important projects and initiatives worthy attention. Indeed, there are many examples of European Commission projects, bilateral and multilateral donors which support the development of higher education in infrastructure, programmes, and academic exchanges, improving quality, mobility, and efforts to improve the linkages between study programs and the economy.

3.2 Higher Education issues addressed in Media

The media heads unanimously assert that education has been covered accordingly, but the nature of coverage is mostly dictated by the events in higher education, which according to them in most cases are not positive news for this sector. Unfortunately, in Kosovo media, education has been closely and narrowly linked to politics, namely political representatives who run the educational institutions. Therefore, most of the news reports dedicated to education in general, and higher education in particular, focus on the incompetence of officials who have been managing educational positions, such as ministers, rectors, deans, and so on.

To this point, education experts agree with media heads and consider that higher education is mainly well addressed and think that there are no agendas to distort news in the field of higher education. To them, some media try to report news objectively and follow this sector as much as possible. But, on the other hand, they claim that there is a lack of professionalism on journalists who cover educational issues. Journalists are not equipped enough with higher education knowledge. In addition, they believe that news is interesting and attractive only if there is something sensational in

it. The MEST official on the other hand thinks the media in many cases is biased.

According to the analysis, it is revealed that the absolute majority of the articles on higher education (over 70%) are transmitting pessimistic notes towards higher education developments in Kosovo.

3.3 *Media's responsibilities in promotion of higher education good practices*

The interviewees claim that media is constantly looking for good practices, thus considering it as a mission to overthrow the bad reflection that has created mismanagement in education. Critical articles on higher education come as a result of post-war problems in this sector, and if one observes the content of the articles, it can be noticed that the *"good news may not be sponsored."* The vast majority of articles (including those that are not related to education) are published in the media because they are news, whose mission is to remedy things that are wrong.

Based on the overall analyzes that have been made, higher education in Kosovo is facing serious concerns about the quality whereas the accreditation of the Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo has constantly accompanied with negative/pessimistic news. The issues that emerged from these institutions have been the main problem for these institutions, while the media has been among the first employers to face these consequences. A large number of new graduates who were still part of these institutions, have often expressed their interest in being part of the media as reporters, moderators, etc. The level of their preparation, to over 70 percent, has been below the expectations of a high school student. Therefore, negative reports on higher education have been inevitable. Of course, there were exceptions, and probably they filled the 30 percent share of positive or neutral reporting. Because of these educational institutions, their accreditation and the lack of monitoring them, quality of Kosovo education is undermined the consequences of which will be felt in the upcoming decades. Surely, media's responsibilities to derive good practices depend on their policies and are not always driven by the public's interest.

3.4 *Media's role towards educational reforms*

The head of *"Periskopi"* electronic media house considers that the role of media is important and they are doing a great job in this respect. Although a bias has been accumulated over the years that education in Kosovo is difficult to improved and this is not as a result of media, but as a result of the political interferences that have affected education while media continues to play its role in fostering reforms rooted in education.

On the other hand, head of *"Express"* media house thinks it is impossible to encourage educational reform via media reports. According to him, media is the last tool to carry this responsibility, and its mission is to inform, not to advocate. This responsibility should be charged to specialized non-governmental organizations. However, it is worth mentioning here that education and reforms in Kosovo are hostage to the low political compromises. Government and different political parties (for their electoral benefits), have consistently made compromises in education. In key political positions, which should be held by experts, they have appointed political partisans without any professional background.

However, higher education experts and media managers claim that media can play a much more active role in higher education if it is more professional and has the opportunity to have journalists for different levels of education. It can and should initiate important debates on higher education field, where experts would share their opinions and contribute to overcoming the current situation and provide ways of how to improve it.

4. **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the findings it can be concluded and recommended as following:

- Higher education is closely linked to politics, namely political representatives that lead most of the educational institutions;
- There is a lack of specialization and profiling of journalists who deal with education in general, and higher education in particular;
- The concerns about the quality of the as well as the the way higher education institutions have been accredited has constantly attracted negative news and criticisms. In addition, News, topics, and critical articles on higher education are reflection of accumulated problems in this sector since 1999 and the end of the war;
- Electronic media in many cases is pessimistic, and a part of news on higher education might serve to certain groups of interest;
- MEST or The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and higher education institutions in Kosovo should be more open to the media and the public by promoting their work and by informing the public about the difficulties faced by higher education in Kosovo;
- Higher education institutions should make better use of their online platforms to promote their educational, research, and scientific work. Modern information technology should not be seen as an advertising tool to attract more students, but as a means of fair information;
- Media should play a much more active role in higher education if they are more specialized and if they have the opportunity to have profiled and professional journalists for different levels of education. A good opportunity would be to organize training programs for journalists covering educational issues, as a part of lifelong learning;
- The media's responsibility is to derive good practices and to have a fair and balanced coverage of HE developments, but unfortunately not always is attracted to publish the topics related to public's interest. Since higher education is of a vital interest to the public and society, media should create editorial policies that primarily protect public interest. They should move from scandal-oriented journalism to content driven journalism in presenting educational events, supporting initiatives, projects and positive examples of higher education institutions; and also providing constructive criticism in cases that are to be criticized;
- Media, higher education institutions, and MEST should deepen their co-operation by fostering the availability of the coherent/comprehensive information to the public and create synergies in strengthening reforms and positive changes in the higher education sector in Kosovo.

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Interviewees

Berat Buzhala: Head of "Express" Media House

Ilir Mirena: Head of "Periskopi" Media House

Xhavit Rexhaj: Expert of Higher Education (former Vice-Rector in a HEI)

Drita Kadriu: Principal of Higher Education Department of MEST (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology)