**Journalists’ and news editors’ views on children as news subjects in Albanian media**

**Exploring issues of newsworthiness and self-censorship**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the views of journalists and news editors on children in Albania, through a series of interviews with noted media professionals. This study finds that stories about children are not considered as newsworthy and children are mostly seen as unreliable stand-alone sources by journalists and news editors. As a mechanism to mitigate the risks of being refused by their editors, journalists increase the newsworthiness of children-focused news items by directing the story towards adults (mostly politicians) and by quoting them. Considering children’s perspectives in news coverage is essential, as it contributes to a social order that acknowledges children’s agency.

**Keywords**: journalists, television news, children, self-censorship, Albania, newsworthiness

**Introduction**

The premise that journalists play a significant role in the ways different issues are presented to the public was identified early on by many scholars researching the role of journalistic practices in the social construction of reality. According to Fishman, ‘news stories, if they reflect anything, reflect the practices of journalists’ (1997: 211). More recently in their book *Gatekeeping theory*, Shoemaker & Vos (2009) classified journalists as the first category of gatekeeping in their levels of analysis. According to them ‘a journalist who deems the event sufficiently newsworthy, allows it to pass the first gate by creating or directing the creation of a message that begins its way through the media organization’ (p.23). Consequently, it is assumed that stories that are not considered to be newsworthy by journalists will be absent from media coverage and will not receive the public’s attention. Perfect examples of this are children and the issues affecting them. Children are often absent from news coverage and there are very few stories about them (Fullertone 2004). One of the findings that appears often in research on children and news coverage is that children are rarely given a voice of their own, and their views have little importance (Ponte & Aroldi 2013; Carter et al., 2009). As a result, little is known regarding the ways in which children make sense of the events happening around them.

This article explores the views of journalists and news editors in Albania, on children and the issues affecting them, respectively as news subjects and topics. The goal is to explore these views as they are articulated by media professionals and investigate how they are embedded in journalistic practices. The term ‘children’ is used to refer to the age group 0–18 years, following the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). This study is part of a bigger research project titled *Children in television news: A multi-method research of the portrayal and reception of children in Albanian television news.* A previous study conducted in this framework monitored the portrayal of children in three national television channels in Albania. Findings from the previous study (see Kaziaj 2016) showed that stories about children comprised only 3.4 per cent of the total news items broadcast during a three month-period on three national television channels. Additionally, three particular media patterns were identified in news items related to children. First, news items were constructed around an adult figure and from an adult perspective while keeping an adult audience in mind. Second, children were customarily filmed in a high-angle shot; as adults see them in real life. Third, journalists mostly chose to quote adults in stories related to children. All these elements, when repeatedly used together in news items, contribute to a patronizing view on children and reinforce the dominant adult perspective of children being dependent and in need of protection. The term ‘adult gaze’ was used as a way to delineate these approaches and it will be further investigated in this article.

Taking this context into consideration, our focus for this article will be to explore journalistic views and practices that prevent children, and the issues affecting them, from being covered in the news media. By presenting these views, debate on the role of media in constructing a social reality, which is inclusive to all actors and voices, can be incited. Focusing on children as one of the vulnerable groups in Albania society, and calling for more media attention is crucial, while keeping in mind that media outlets are the central agents in the advancement of children’s rights and in fostering their well-being in democratic societies (Carter 2014).

First, the context of media realities in Albania will be presented in order to demonstrate how the specificities of this context have an impact on reporting choices that involve the coverage of children, a discussion that informs the findings of the study. Subsequently, studies on the views of journalists on children are examined, aiming to exploring how these views influence the quality of children’s coverage in news. Finally, findings from the interviews with journalists and news editors are presented.

**Current Albanian (news) media context**

Albania has developed a rich media context in the last years. According to data published from the Albanian Media Authority, in the country of a little more than 2.8 millioninhabitants, there are 71 private local television channels, two private national television channels, and one public broadcaster (TVSH) currently operating. Eight of these are news channels[[1]](#endnote-1) (Kevin et al., 2013), all of which are privately owned and freely available in most of the country’s territory. Most of the other television channels have regular news editions. Albania is second in Europe in terms of the number of news channels offered, behind Turkey who is in first place. This is an impressive ranking, especially when taking into consideration the population of Turkey, which is 26 times larger than the population of Albania. Other neighbouring countries, such as Macedonia and Kosovo, each have one news channel.

With this abundance of outlets, one would expect a wide range of topics to be covered in news and other programs, and for the media to reflect the diverse voices of its society, however this is not the case. Reports monitoring Albanian media outlets confirm that political issues are the main subjects covered in the news, eclipsing all social issues (Lani 2013; Londo 2005). This is related to the fact that Albanian media is largely defined by the nature of its media owners, who in most cases, are the only financial source allowing for these media outlets to exist (Marku 2012). As such, they establish and influence the editorial policy of their own media and use it to advance their own interests, which are often related to politics. Some media owners have become rich, mainly through privileges obtained by the government in the processes of tenders and the privatization of different public assets. This collection of riches results in media owners who are indebted to the government or political parties, and thus willing to wield their media outlets for political influence (Stefani 2012). As a result, the agenda of news outlets, its ordering, selection and sourcing, is very close to the agenda of the government or politics in general (Londo 2005). This leaves less space for topics of social relevance, particularly issues covering children.

Furthermore, newsroom-staff members are often organized in such a way as to reflect the favouritism towards politics in Albanian media. Journalists that were interviewed for this study revealed that in the newsrooms where they work, at least four journalists are assigned to cover only politics, which comprises news from the prime minister’s office, the main opposition party, parliament and different ministries, while the task of covering social issues – which is an umbrella term for issues related to education, health and social services, including those of children – is usually delegated to only one reporter.

There is no estimation of the total number of journalists working for television channels in Albania due to the lack of formal contracts in many media outlets (Union of Albanian Journalists 2012). A latest report on Albania published by the Balkan Investigative Report Network (BIRN), for which 121 journalists were interviewed, states that the combination of ‘the economic and political interests of media owners,’ ‘lack of physical security’ and ‘lack of job security’ are the main factors that push journalists toward self-censorship, which is a widespread phenomenon among media professionals in Albania (Halo et al., 2015:5).

**Children as news subjects or news sources: Reflections from previous studies**

The literature on children and news shows that children are mostly considered as newsworthy in stories triggered by a tragic element (Carter 2014; Holland 2006; Davies 2003; Goonasekera 2001; Moeller 1999). Within this dominant frame of the vulnerable victim they are included in discourses of (distant) suffering (Joye 2009; Chouliaraki 2008, 2006; Moeller 2002) as ‘the image of an endangered child is the perfect ‘grabber’ (Moeller 2002, 39). Hence, most research on journalists and children is concentrated around general ethical obligations of journalists while reporting on children (Mackay 2008; Fullertone 2004; Goddard & Saunders 2000; Moeller 1999). This has also been the case for the scarce research studies conducted in Albania that have mostly dealt with the ‘misuse’ of children in print media (see Sulce 2014; UNICEF 2008,2010). However few studies, which will be extensively discussed below, have specifically examined journalists’ decision-making processes for considering children as news subjects or news sources. This body of research is mainly carried out in North America while in Europe, research is framed in the context of children and media in general and does not focus specifically on the role of journalists (*see* Carter 2014; Buckingham 2011; Livingstone 2009; Ponte 2007). The same can be concluded for research on children and news media conducted in Africa (Rikhotso et al., 2014) and Asia (Goonasekera 2001).

Few studies were found when reviewing the empirical research on journalists’ decision-making processes for including children in the news. Coleman (2011), for instance, used a controlled experiment to examine the decision-making process of 99 professional journalists in the United States, and investigated if they held different attitudes, made different decisions, and used different levels of moral judgment for stories that involved children compared to stories that involved adults. Additionally, Fullertone (2004) drew on several Canadian cases and used in-depth interviews with journalists to explore if *Journalists are Guilty of Exploiting Children*. Likewise, Mackay (2008) and Slopen et al. (2007) focused on newspaper coverage of children, with particular emphasis on the privacy, accuracy and elements of responsible journalism[[2]](#endnote-2). Finally, Stone (1999) and Tompkins (1999) studied children as interviewees in live footage or breaking news events and provided guidelines for journalists on how to deal with children under these circumstances.

Findings from these studies are somewhat contradictory. Coleman (2010), in her study *Journalists’ Moral Judgment About Children* found that although journalists believed they were protecting children from harm, they did not carry through with those beliefs, i.e. they did not display significantly higher levels of moral judgment for children than adults, nor did they withhold children’s photographs more often than those of adults. On the contrary, the study on the newspaper coverage of mental illness (Slopen et, al., 2007) found that articles related to children were more likely to incorporate elements of responsible journalism, while articles related to adults were significantly more likely to use stigmatizing terminology. Drawing on interviews with journalists, Fullerton (2004) concluded that even though journalists confessed that they treated children differently from adults, there were no real guidelines or protocols in place to ensure this. On the other hand, Mackay (2008) argued in his findings that reporters compromised the privacy of children by merely naming them in the media.

One explanation for the contradictory findings of these studies could be the sample taken into consideration. While Coleman (2010) considers all children aged 0-18, the study by Slopen et al. (2007) only takes into account articles related to children who suffer from mental illnesses. Differences also emerge from the focus on two different mediums, either television or print media. This is the case for Mackay (2008), whose research focuses on the privacy of children in newspapers. If children quoted in television news are considered reliable sources because of the visual characteristics that this medium displays, ‘newspaper journalists may feel more pressure to assure readers that the children in their stories are real, not fakes or composites, by naming them and showing their pictures’ (Coleman 2010, 267).

Despite the contradictory findings, these studies build their arguments upon common ground, namely the power irregularities between children and adults in news coverage. Adults are considered trusted sources and are attributed more individual responsibility than children. As a result, adults are quoted more often and featured in more news items (Carter 2014; Fullertone 2010). Furthermore, these studies highlight the important role that journalists’ decision-making processes play in the ways children are included in news items or quoted as news sources. As such they provide a valuable ground in confirming the choices for conducting in-person interviews with media professionals as a way to explore their views on children. However, all these studies put the emphasis on journalists’ moral judgment as individuals and fail to investigate this role in the context of media organizations. The influence that journalistic practices or the decision-making processes in newsrooms have on the ways children are covered in news media, remain unexplored. The current study responds to this need through a series of interviews with journalists and news editors, thus revealing the views and opinions of media professionals on children, and the practices of newsgathering and the decision-making processes in newsrooms, which can play an important role in the ways children are covered and represented in news coverage.

**Study design**

Five professional journalists and three news editors from leading television channels in Albania participated (Table 1), following a criterion sampling (Creswell 2007). Journalists who cover issues related to children were invited, with a primary focus on interviewing journalists who work for national television channels (TVSH, TV Klan and Top Channel) and news channels (Ora News, News 24, A1 Report). Furthermore, journalists with considerable experience in covering social issues in the news media were interviewed. Despite the limited number of people who participated in this study- due to the limited availability of journalists who cover social issues in Albanian television news, the in-depth semi-structured interviews provided sufficient information that allowed for theoretical saturation (Lindlof &Taylor 2010). The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours, based on journalists’ and news editors’ experience and willingness to share their opinions.

The interview guide was based on a partially standardized template with open-ended questions. It was partially standardized in the sense that several topics of discussion relevant to this study were selected prior to the interview. They remain open-ended in that they did not require the interviewee to reply within a restricted frame. The aim is not only to provide qualitative data on the accounts of journalists and news editors on children, but more precisely to consider how these accounts are established and how they impact, transform and reproduce specific representations [of children] in the news media (see Howarth 2011; Hall 1997).

The interviews with news editors mostly focused on organizational practices, codes of ethics and the news selection criteria. The main focus of the interviews with journalists was their views on children as news topics or subjects, aspects of news-gathering practices, organizational challenges and their take on deontological issues related to the representation of children in news coverage. All interviews were digitally recorded, manually transcribed *ad verbum* and shared with the interviewees for their prior consent.

Grounded theory, more specifically constant comparative approach, was employed as an analytical strategy (Boieje 2002; Glaser 1992). Firstly, open-coding was conducted, i.e. reading the interviews several times and creating tentative labels. Secondly, axial coding was performed to identify relationships among the open codes (Tracy 2013). We identified a central phenomenon, namely, self-censorship, the context wherein this phenomenon emerges, intervening conditions, and consequences. Thirdly, the axial codes were analysed and several main themes were developed. The main themes emerging from the interviews were related to the newsworthiness of children, journalists’ consideration of children as news sources and factors that prevent journalists in Albania from covering children more in the news. All these themes will be extensively discussed in the following section.

Findings from a previous monitoring study (Kaziaj 2016) will be used to contextualize the findings from the interviews. Findings from this study showed that stories on children barely reached 3% of total news items. This is a very low figure taking into consideration that children of age 0-18 comprise 25% of the entire population.[[3]](#endnote-3) The category politics/government was the most present in news items related to children. It included all news items in which the focus is political issues, government decisions, elections, and speeches of political actors addressing children’s issues or politicians’ attendance at events with children. Additionally, children were quoted in only 9.7% (N=154) of the total news items related to them, while adults counted for being quoted in 80.5% of the same sample. Furthermore, results showed that news media mostly see children in limited roles, either as objects of emotional appeal or as victims. Specific findings from this research will be presented throughout this article, in order to establish a context on the representation of children in the news media in Albania. This enables checking for what journalists and news editors think of children as news subjects and how these beliefs are carried through and reflected in the actual news content.

**A child as a victim is ‘good’ news!**

Journalists admitted that children are not being given enough coverage in the news. Klodiana Kapo (Top Channel) stated, ‘the portrayal of children in television news is meagre and erroneous while their real problems are not being covered’. On the same lines, the news director, Ilva Tare (Ora News) added that it comes as a result of the limited capacity of human resources in newsrooms:

I have tried to give coverage to children who are facing problems, as well as children that have a positive example to give; meaning a talented child. But this is not enough! In our newsrooms the capacity, as well as the rhythm with which things function, doesn’t allow us to have a person appointed to children’s issues.

Hence, journalists have to be selective when covering news stories about children. Based on their experience, there is a type of news item that appears most often in news coverage: children as victims. Interviewees admit that media outlets look for the ghoulish news stories, which arouses people’s sentiments. According to Kapo (Top channel) ‘journalists still relate news with an element of sadness and if a child is added to this equation it has double effects’. Moreover, one of our interviewees (Brunilda Cami, TV Klan) attributed her choice to portray children as victims to the expectations of news editors:

The perception still exists that the value of a news item on children, is the sad and the macabre, and they [the editors] don’t pay much attention to other news topics. In our morning meeting, if I report that I am planning to work on a news item about children in a school or kindergarten organizing a cultural activity, I am afraid that my editor will answer: And so what? Why is that important?

When news editors were asked about the newsworthiness of children, they confirmed that ‘children as victims’ is seen as more newsworthy than other topics. ‘There is no doubt that negative news on children always comes up on headlines. Media outlets are still ‘thirsty’ for this kind of news’ (Pandi Gjata, Top Channel). Nevertheless, they also add that the tendency for Albanian media outlets to cover children in a victim-related context is not only a matter of editorial choice, but also a reflection of the many problems that children face as part of a marginalized group. Tare (news director, Ora News) mentions domestic abuse as one of the biggest problems, but also problems with education or health. As an example she refers to a news item about the lack of heating facilities in classrooms where, ‘children were filmed while they were shyly sitting in cold classrooms wearing heavy jackets’.

Journalists were asked if they remember any case when their editors refused a news item on children, and all of them confirmed that it has never happened. In other words, journalists appear to have cultivated a behaviour of self-censorship when producing news on children by conforming to what they perceive as their editor’s expectations and producing more news items featuring children as victims.

Results from the media monitoring process (Kaziaj, 2016) showed that children are mostly portrayed as either victims, or objects of emotional appeal. These two roles combined accounted for 48.7 per cent of all items. The combination of beliefs that a child as a victim is more newsworthy and that journalists are reflecting children’s realities as they exist in Albania, as articulated by journalists and news editors, explain the dominant portrayal of children as victims in Albanian news.

Portraying children as victims has several implications, as it can contribute to stances and reactive social policies that promote control and surveillance (Altheide 2002), while imposing certain constructs on children as being naive, dependent and in need of protection (Carter 2014). However, only one journalist was able to reflect on the possible consequences that such a portrayal could have on the way children are seen:

By portraying children as victims, we reinforce several stereotypes of children as being vulnerable, or in need of protection; and we deny them a meaningful participation in society. We – including us journalists – see children as minors, fragile, not real humans but mostly as breathing objects that we can put wherever we think is best. I know it’s not ethical to call children that, but that’s how we actually see them (Cami, TV Klan).

Furthermore, portraying children as victims in news coverage has several ethical implications for the media outlets themselves (see Kitzinger 2004; Carter 2003). There is a special section [Section 5] dedicated to children in the Code of Broadcast in Albania, (Nr. 01/2014, p. 9) approved by the Albanian Media Authority (AMA) that provides detailed instructions to all audio-visual media outlets on how children should be treated as news topics and news sources. It highlights that ‘every child has the right to receive appropriate information, the right to freedom of expression and participation in the media. The application of media rules and norms in favour of children’s best interests is crucial’. Nevertheless, only one journalist knew about the existence of such a code. On the other hand, the Albanian Media Authority (AMA) currently monitors only the presence of different political actors and political parties in the main news editions of the three national television channels. There is no monitoring regarding children’s portrayal in the news, as foreseen in the Code of Broadcast and the Law on Audio-visual Media in Albania (Nr 97/2013, p.6).

The interviewees stated that there is no written ethical code in their newsrooms, but there is a common understanding among journalists when it comes to issues of children. Rules are usually learned in their journalism studies, and further informed by newsroom editors. Asked about the work of the media monitoring body in Albania (AMA), almost all news editors and journalists confess that they are not aware of any protocols or codes compiled by AMA on the portrayal of children. There was one interesting case, presented as clear evidence for the lack of communication between a news editor and a journalist of the same television channel. The editor said:

AMA [the official monitoring body] has never functioned properly. Every day, there are examples of the misuse of children in media and no reactions at all from AMA. Minors are being shown in television programs after midnight, in the same studio with striptease dancers (Gjata, Top Channel).

Contrarily, the journalist answered:

AMA has a clear and well-developed ethical code on the portrayal of children in television programs and news coverage, which is continuously being monitored and actions are taken against those who don’t abide by the law. AMA also developed a very good law on broadcasting, which was passed last year in the parliament and contains different articles on the portrayal of children in the news media (Kapo, Top channel).

As it is shown here, the lack of clear rules and guidelines on the coverage of children in newsrooms and the lack of awareness on the existing rules and guidelines in the Code of Broadcast, have created a general confusion among media professionals on how to cover issues related to children and specifically those related to children as victims. Furthermore, this situation is encouraged by the absence of regular media monitoring processes and reports by the Albanian Media Authority. In cases where some measures were taken against some media outlets they were mostly seen as biased and unfair due to the low level of trust among media outlets in Albania regarding the legitimacy of the media monitoring authority.

**Children as news sources**

Journalists and news editors were asked about their views on children as news sources. They listed several reasons for not quoting children regularly in news items. First, they justified their absence through references of ‘professional criteria’ such as not revealing the identity of a child in news item on children as victims. ‘Interviewing children is difficult because there are ethical implications. You need signed agreements from parents and it takes longer’ (Kapo, Top Channel). Justifying the lack of children’s voices in the news media by referring to ‘professional criteria’, has been a predominant finding in research on the representation of children in news coverage (Carter et al., 2009; Goonasekera 2001).

Second, according to some journalists, children are not interesting subjects to be quoted in the news:

It is very hard to find a child with good communication skills that is interesting for the audience. To give an example, in a news item about the broken heating systems in kindergartens, you can ask a child if he/she is cold and they will answer simply: Yes! (Manjola Hasa, Ora News).

News editors went a step further by pointing out the deficiencies of children as news sources in comparison to adults, and by limiting their opportunities to get quoted to only some special events that are mostly seen as related to children. According to Gjata (Top channel):

Children as minors do not possess the sufficient knowledge to be quoted in news. You can’t give a protagonist role to children as you can do with a head teacher. There are special days when children get quoted, for example on the 7th of March – celebrated as the National Teachers Day – it makes sense to ask children on that day ‘what kind of present are you giving to your teacher’? (Gjata, Top Channel).

Third, according to our interviewees, children are usually given the chance to be quoted in news items but they refuse to do so:

They answer that their parents don’t approve it, or that they are afraid to be exposed in news items that discuss negative behaviours. They don’t understand that the news item is not about them but the phenomenon, as such. Maybe it is also difficult for a child to handle a decent interview (Tare, Ora News).

Furthermore she explains that the lack of children’s voice in the news comes as a result of them being somehow not interested in what she calls ‘the adult’s world’ or ‘life outside of them’.

As the above quotes show, the views of journalists and news editors on children as news sources are complementary to each other. While journalists point to certain practices that prevent them from quoting children, such as signing parental consent, news editors focused the discussion on children’s communicative abilities when compared to adults. These views are a strong demonstration of what has been introduced earlier in this article as ‘the adult gaze’, according to which, children’s opinions are seen as unsatisfactory and their viewpoints limited when compared to the opinions of adults. As a result, they are quoted less in news items.

Empirical data from the monitoring process (Kaziaj, 2016) showed that news items where ‘*two or more adults*’ are quoted count for 35.7%, compared to only 3.9% of cases where ‘*two or more children*’ are quoted. No significant differences among television channels were found when quoting children in news items. Neither the television channels that were monitored, nor the media authority in Albania, provide data on children’s appearance in news coverage or children as news sources. As such, the findings presented here and the insights from interviews with journalists and news editors are the only basis on which to account for the views of journalists and news editors on children as news sources.

Journalists and news editors confirmed the finding that politicians are among the most quoted sources in news items related to children[[4]](#endnote-4). There was one story that was brought up in all interviews. The journalist of the Public Broadcaster (Sonila Mlloja, TVSH), described the story this way:

Two months ago, there was a big debate on the misuse of children in the news when an item about the leader of the opposition party, Lulzim Basha, was broadcast. A girl [around 9 years old] was featured heavily crying while describing the horror she witnessed when police officers violently entered her house. The politician was seen in his attempts to cover the camera with his hand as a way to hide the child’s identity. This news item was shot and distributed to all television channels by his staff. I don’t think I would cut out of the video the tears of the child, but maybe I wouldn’t have taken it so far. The best is to blur the face of the child but not the message. We all have the right to know what the child is thinking and feeling in those moments.

As a matter of fact, all television channels that were monitored (including the Public Broadcaster) reported this news item with an identical image, narrative and collection of quotes (TV Klan; Top Channel; TVSH, 15 November 2014). None of the media outlets edited the part where the child was seen crying – including the journalist who was just quoted above by saying that she would do otherwise. This is a violation of The Code of Broadcast for audio-visual media outlets, which clearly states (article 5.2): ‘News media shall not reveal the identity of a child or interview him/her if the child has been the witness of a troublesome event in his family or outside of it’. When asked why they decided to broadcast this news item, the editors explained that the decision was not theirs, but they were being told so ‘by people who stand higher in the hierarchy’.

As it was shown in the section on *Current Albanian (news) media context* (see page 3)media owners play a significant role in the editorial decision-making process in newsrooms. As this example clearly shows, journalists’ and news editors’ views on children are not the only factors that influence the presence (or not) of children’s voices in news items, or their ethical coverage. The strong affiliation of media owners with political parties plays a significant role in this respect. Furthermore, media owners in most of the cases are not media professionals, but people with interests in politics as a way to protect or expand their businesses. As such they are not aware of the journalistic practices or the importance of ethically covering children in news stories, and they are not interested in pushing for the more meaningful inclusion of children in media coverage.

In general, interviews with journalists and news editors revealed their lack of consideration for children when compared to adults. Only one journalist reflected on the power relationship between children and adults as an important factor that influences the lack of children’s agency[[5]](#endnote-5) in the news media:

We judge children as being too small to provide the ‘big thought’ that we need in our news items. Failing to find a child who can articulate well, we cut it short and quote only school directors or teachers. Usually it is these adults that discriminate children by not informing them on what is happening around them. As a result, children are not able to speak about these issues (Cami, Tv Klan).

Nevertheless, this belief was not translated into better coverage of children in news stories because of the tangled nature of media and politics in Albania and the influence of media owners in the news coverage.

As this section showed, journalists’ and news editors’ views and opinions on children as unreliable sources and the influence of media owners in the decision-making process in newsrooms, play an essential role in providing (or denying) a platform for children’s voices to be heard, their agency to be acknowledged and for the ethical coverage of children as news sources.

**Self-censorship as safe mode**

In the previous section, the overwhelming presence of news coverage on politics and political actors in Albanian media outlets was touched upon, which is also one of the main themes that emerged in our interviews with news editors and journalists. As one of the journalists noted:

We dedicate most of the coverage to politics, and this is breath-taking because we just transmit that x-politician said this and x-politician said that. This is just propaganda whereas all real issues concerning children should be put first. (Kapo, Top Channel)

The interviews provided a deeper explanation of the tangled nature of news and politics in Albania. Two factors were identified from journalists and news editors as influencing the news content and in turn having an impact on the coverage of issues related to children. First, the government and different political parties are increasingly offering ready-made news items, which leave less space for covering other topics. Tare (Ora News) puts it this way:

There is a compromise that media sticks to, based on an economic logic. On one side there are ready-made news items offered by political actors that come as a ‘package’ and on the other side there are issues related to children that require a commitment to investigate, data to support the news, or expert sources. Based on the nature of news, which is based on fast daily consumption, they choose to go for the easiest way.

A former news editor supports this view by saying:

It is easier for us to cover five events of different political actors in Tirana [where their offices are based] than produce five news items on different social issues from other parts of the country (Androniki Kolka, News 24).

Journalists confess that as part of their daily routine, they participate in conferences or meetings organized by political parties or the government. Two journalists and a news editor used the word *qoka* – which in English could be translated as *payback –* to describe the real reasons behind attending these meetings*.* In Albanian, this word is used to describe a tradition that is still strong, explicitly, you have to be present at the events of your relatives or friends and contribute [financially] in case they did the same for you[[6]](#endnote-6). In the context of media and politics, it implies that journalists have to attend these meetings as a way to pay back the favours that the media outlet has profited from. As it was stated earlier in this article (see the section Current Albanian (news) media context) some media owners have become rich mainly through the privileges obtained by the government in the process of receiving tenders and the privatization of different public assets. Moreover, in the last parliamentarian elections of June 2013, two owners of media outlets became members of the Parliament.

The second challenge that comes as a derivative of the first, pertains to the blurred lines of what could be considered as the topic of a news item. The biggest struggle for journalists covering social issues – including those of children – is to find the ‘social aspect’of a news item where politicians are present. Based on the monitoring analysis (Kaziaj, 2016), a large sample of news items on children, 37 cases out of a total of 154, feature politicians in events with children. These news items have titles such as: ‘Basha [Tirana’s mayor] inaugurates Christmas tree, together with orphan children’ (TVSH, 06 December), ‘Rama [Prime minister], supports children of police officers killed on duty’, (TV Klan, 24 December). These news stories are constructed around politicians, and they are the ones quoted in these news items. Children are simply used as a decoration. Nonetheless, all these news items were reported as ‘Social Issues’ in prime-time news. Journalists express the difficulties that they face while having to produce these kinds of news items:

Usually there is just one sentence that can be seen as a social element in this event. But then they go on making political promises such as ‘we will build 40 kindergartens’ and stuff like that in front of children. Of course this is purely political and only contributes to them taking credit or gaining public trust for the next elections (Cami, TV Klan).

Additionally, they referred to what their editors would prefer to hear or in some cases what politicians expect from them:

In most cases, news coverage is about politicians, while children are there just as objects. The thing is that when you don’t quote politicians, you can expect a phone call from their staff complaining about why you did not do so (Hasa, Ora News).

The strong influence of politicians in shaping news events can be traced in the following quote:

When a political figure is seen at an event with children, none of the media coverage focuses on the activity anymore, but the news item starts and ends with what the politician says. It is not that journalists covering social issues don’t recognize this, but this is what we are told to do (Cami, TV Klan).

On the other hand, news editors, when asked for the rationale behind including these news items in the social section of the news broadcasts, answered:

We are usually in a dilemma to decide in which section a certain news item belongs, for example the political or social news section. This decision becomes more difficult in a context like ours where political protagonism is to be found everywhere, in all kinds of events covered by the media (Gjata, Top Channel).

Journalists were asked if they ever tried to cover a news item of this type by not focusing the story on the politician but on the children. Cami (TV Klan) stated that:

I never tried to bring this up to my editor. But on the other hand, they literally guided me to go to that event because politician X would be there. They don’t mention children. When they say that, there is no space to argue.

While both journalists and news editors acknowledge the overwhelming presence of politics and its toll on the representation of social issues in Albania, none of them clearly articulates the real reasons for such a setting. As Schudson (1995:14) points out, ‘news is then produced by people who operate often unwittingly within a cultural system, a reservoir of stored cultural meanings and patterns of discourse’. The influence that media owners play in the decision-making processes in newsrooms, which is stated in all reports on media freedom in Albania, is the main element that could explain why there is an overwhelming presence of news coverage on politics and political actors. Their influence leads to the creation of self-censorship among media professionals covering issues related to children. This behaviour could be described as a two-step process. First, journalists frame their coverage based on what they assume is considered newsworthy by their editors, and as a result produce news items related to children that conform to the already existing patterns, i.e. representing children as the ideal victim. Second, based on what they perceive as favouritism towards politics in Albanian media [from media owners], they include political actors in the news items related to children as a way to increase newsworthiness and mitigate the risks of being refused by their editors.

Self-censorship, as a phenomenon that exists among journalists in Albania, has already been stated in reports on media freedom in Albania (Halo et al., 2015; Kronholm 2013). Nonetheless, these studies mostly refer to self-censorship as a phenomenon to be found exclusively among journalists that cover political issues. As our findings show, the relationship between media and politics in Albania has an impact on journalists covering social issues as well. The prominence of politicians in news items related to children is clear evidence of the existence of such a phenomenon. Furthermore, the existence of self-censorship can be traced to what all journalists and news editors said when asked, ‘what changes would you like to see in the news media?’ All their answers came down to ‘less politics and more *real* issues’.

**Conclusion**

Through a series of in-depth interviews with journalists and news editors of television channels in Albania, this study explored their views on children.The notion that children are not newsworthy subjects or trustworthy stand-alone sources when compared to adults, was reflected in the opinions of most journalists and news editors, which points to power asymmetries between children and adults. Such views on children suggest the existence of what we have called ‘the adult gaze’ among news media professionals. According to this view, journalists and news editors set adults as the standard from which to judge children. As a consequence, children are prevented from having agency of their own. Furthermore, previous research attributes the absence of children in news coverage to general ethical issues (Carter 2014; Rikhotso et al., 2014; Goonasekera 2001). As this study showed, journalists’ assumptions of what their editors would like them to cover prevents them from quoting children or even considering children-focused stories. Journalists framed this behaviour as avoiding the ‘So what?’ question from their editors.

A crucial phenomenon identified by journalists and news editors that influences the coverage of children in the news media, is the intertwined relationship between media coverage and politics in Albania. News outlets in Albania compromise their content, due to limited resources, by mainly providing coverage of political actors and their events, which are packaged as ‘ready-made’ news. Reports on press freedom in Albania show that government influence and various political parties have the tendency to privilege certain media outlets that support their views through processes of bidding for advertising acquisition. This vicious cycle between politicians and media owners in Albania takes its toll on quality coverage and the representation of other issues not related to politics. Journalists covering children find themselves squeezed into this cycle every day. On the one hand they adhere to what they think their editors value as newsworthy, on the other they must perform along the perceived political affiliation of the media owner in which they work.

Journalists who cover issues related to children displayed an understanding of the need and importance of covering children and their issues in the news media. They share a common understanding of the importance of child protection in news stories. Nonetheless, their beliefs and good will are not reflected in their work. Children are not being recognized as active agents who can have their own say in the news media. As a result, this article framed the phenomenon as ‘self-censorship’ among journalists, which is further strengthened by the economic insecurities due to lack of formal contracts for journalists and delays in the payment of salaries for roughly 92 per cent of media outlets (Union of Albanian Journalists 2012).

Journalists who studied journalism, or have been trained on how to cover children in the news, showed a better understanding of the importance of children’s participation in news coverage and expressed a stronger will to acknowledge children’s agency. A detail that drew our attention during the interview process was the surprise that all interviewees showed when explained the topic of research. All participants confessed that this was the first time they had been contacted to express their views on such a topic. This points to the negligibility of children among researchers, children’s rights activists and news media professionals, in Albania.

Although this article provides a very good account of the views of media professionals, who are considered to be important gatekeepers in the production process (see Shoemaker and Reese, 2014), these views do not present a thorough exploration of the production process of news items on children. Some attempts have already been made to explore the production process of news items on children (see Matthews, 2010, 2003), but they have mostly considered news programs targeting children, such as the BBC’s Newsround. Such programs are missing in many countries. Therefore, investigating news production processes on items related to children would reveal additional aspects on why children are not considered as important news topics by media outlets- as previous studies (Fullertone, 2014; Carter, 2014, Ponte, 2007) show-, and may aid in drafting policies and interventions targeting media organizations and media professionals.

As this research showed, journalists’ beliefs and views on children as news subjects play an important role in bringing their stories to the public’s attention, or making their voices heard. If news outlets would consider children’s accounts as much as they consider adults’ (especially politicians), they would provide recognition for their agency and help raise children’s social status. Keeping in mind the current situation of children in Albania, who are mostly seen as vulnerable and distanced from public life, this is very vital. In the end, if told accordingly, stories about children could help understand the ways children make sense of and contribute to the reality that surrounds them. The Albanian media would, in this way, exercise their role as it is foreseen by the Law on Audio-visual Media in the Republic of Albania (Nr 97/2013: 6), ‘with a special focus on the rights, interests, moral and legal demands of children’.

**Note on contributor**

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**Table 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Interviewee[[7]](#endnote-7) (in alphabetical order)** | **Position and affiliation** | **Date of interview** | **Years of Experience as a journalist** | **Setting** |
| Entela Bajramaj | JournalistA1 Report TV | 06/01/2015 | 8 years | In person |
| Brunilda Cami | JournalistTV Klan | 9/01/2015 | 14 years | In person |
| Pandi Gjata | News EditorTop Channel TV | 24/12/2014 | 12 years | In person |
| Manjola Hasa | JournalistOra News TV | 20/01/2015 | 4 years | In person |
| Klodiana Kapo | JournalistTop Channel TV | 26/12/2014 | 15 years | In person |
| Androniki Kolka | Former News editorMorning show HostNews 24 | 23/01/2015 | 7 years | In person |
| Sonila Mlloja | JournalistPublic Broadcaster, TVSH | 25/12/2014 | 15 years | In person |
| Ilva Tare | News DirectorOra News | 22/01/2015 | 18 years | In person |

1. TV “Ora”, ABC news, A1 report, News 24, UTV Education, TV Scan, Channel 1, Neser TV [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘responsible journalism’ is used to indicate the presence of perspectives from experts, statistics related to the topic, referrals to additional sources and avoidance of slang terminology. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.instat.gov.al/al/themes/popullsia.aspx?tab=tabs-5> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In total, the number of political voices, including the Prime Minister, comprised 29 per cent (N=154), outnumbering all other actors. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Davies (2003) defines children’s agency in the context of news media as “their ability to control the action”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Most often, in celebrative or grief occasions, the host keeps a list of all participants and their financial contribution to the event. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. All journalists approved to be mentioned by name in the study. All journalists who participated in this study have studied Journalism or Media as their Bachelor or masters. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)