

Journalistic Expression in Social Networks: The case of Georgia

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Abstract

The freedom of expression is a right recognized in all the developed countries of the world, and its protection is a priority in a democratic society. Despite that, recently there have been a number of reports that published information about cases of journalists dismissed from work due to the fact that they expressed their viewpoint on social networks.

The goal of the research is the identification of the situation existing in Georgia with regards to the freedom to express viewpoints on social networks. In other words, it looks into whether or not editorial boards have their own media policy, if they do (or do not) impose certain restrictions on their journalists, and how ethical are comments made by journalists on social networks over the issue they are working on.

The research uses a qualitative research method- in-depth interview. Therefore, in this context, the editors of the four highest-rated newspapers and seven media experts in Georgia have been polled. The results have shown that according to the majority of the sample, it is unethical for a journalist to express an opinion with regard to the material he/she had been working on, and that the dismissal from job in this case may be justified, yet the journalist should be given warning in this context.

Key words: Social Networks, Journalists, Expression, Ethics, Credibility

Introduction

The history of independent media in Georgia begins together with the country's independence back in 1990s. Prior to that, as in a country being part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), there were only state-owned media companies. The independence of Georgia has also effect on the media sector and has promoted the development of a wider variety of media outlets. Approximately up to 180 media outlets exist in the country according to a recent survey (media.ge, 2012). Parallel to the growth of the number of media outlets, the issue of self-

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regulation had been put on the agenda, as there was not a single standard as to how various types of events were supposed to be covered.

The first self-regulation document developed in Georgia was the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters (GNCC, 2009). The act was adopted after several years' work in March 2009. The document is an integral part of the Law on Broadcasting (Parliament of Georgia, 2009), with part of the articles being of a recommendatory nature and part of them being obligations (Parliament of Georgia, 2009). The same year the second self-regulation mechanism - the Charter of Journalistic Ethics - was created, which included eleven main principles. More than a hundred journalists founded the organization themselves. The Charter is administered by the Ethics Council, which considers the statements submitted against journalists (The Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics, 2009). Georgian society is becoming more and more interested in media ethics and issues existing in this field. A proof for that is an increased number of statements against journalists submitted to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics- if in 2013 the Charter's council considered six statements, then in 2014 the number increased to twenty-one (The Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics, 2015).

The Charter of Journalistic Ethics does not contain a separate article dedicated to the protection of the impartiality standard. Though it is true that Chapter VI of the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters (GNCC, 2009) is entirely dedicated to the impartiality, yet the act solely sets the general norms. For instance, it reads that facts and comments should be separate from one another, and a journalist must equally represent each relevant opinion and preserve balance (The Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics, 2009).

None of the aforementioned self-regulation mechanism provides specific clarifications regarding journalists' conduct and expression in a non-journalistic product when stating a personal opinion through online and social media platforms. For example, is the impartiality of a media outlet called in question when a journalist presents his own assessment concerning the topic his working on? And, is the newspaper's impartiality is being endangered by such a behaviour?

Meanwhile, along with the technological development, new avenues of expressing one's opinion and reaching to the wider audience are being created. Accordingly, new types of violation of ethical standards start taking place, which go outside the framework of the guidelines that had been created before the onset of digital era. Also, similar to people of various

professions, journalists as well register in social networks, and use it to engage in communication with the public. The matter is that none of the regulations existing in Georgia ensures regulation in this sense. Even general guidelines do not exist with regard to the activity in social networks. For example, it is not stated whether or not should a journalist become a ‘friend’ with a politician on a social network, according to what standard and rule should he/she use opinions expressed in social networks in his own media outlet and so on.

The only reference that can be found with respect this topic is the ruling of the Georgian Supreme Court from 9 January 2014 (1559-1462-2012), where the court considers Facebook as a public space and states:

“Public circulation” does not imply voicing of information solely in the television or press, especially in conditions when social media, blogging, and micro-blogging play an increasingly important role in the life of modern society. Anything that can provide unlimited access to information to an indefinite circle of people must be considered as a source of public circulation” (Supreme Court as cited in Jorbenadze, Bakhtadze & Matcharadze as cited in 2014, p 45).

The court also clarified that any user granted access to information by a person could share the given information to his contacts or an indefinite circle of people, as well as cite it in a private conversation, press, or web publication. Considering these very properties of a social network, publication of the so-called status or comment by a named user must be considered as public circulation of information (Supreme Court as cited in Jorbenadze, Bakhtadze & Matcharadze as cited 2014, p. 45). With this clarification, the Supreme Court has in fact resolved the question - whether or not is Facebook a public space. Consequently, an expression stated therein is regarded as public expression.

The freedom of expression is a right recognized in all the developed countries of the world, and its protection is a priority issue in a democratic society. Nonetheless, recently there have been a number of reports highlighting journalists’ dismissal from office due to the expression of opinion on social networks (Tomno, 2012). In this sense, it is important to discuss matters as: is sanctioning an employee on such a basis a restriction of expression or a protection of the employer’s reputation? Where does the dividing line between the interests of the company owners and the freedom of speech lie? There is no clear answer to those issues, because there is not a common social media policy and employers always act depending on their own interpretation of the regulation.

The goal of the research was to analyze whether or not the impartiality standard is called in question when a journalists expresses in social networks an opinion regarding the issues he/she is

working on. It is also important to assess the fairness of a dismissal from office for releasing such a statement. Moreover, it is important to mention three incidents that took place in this context, two of them in the international media, and a third one that stirred up the greatest ever controversy in Georgia.

The first incident is related to the dismissal from office of a CNN Middle East Editor, Octavia Nasr, due to an expression posted on Twitter. In 2010, she expressed regret over the passing of the Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, one of the Hezbollah's leaders, whom she had previously stated, to have respected a lot. Her tweet induced a response from Israel's supporters that had criticized the editor. CNN executives decided to dismiss Octavia Nasr that had worked for the network for twenty years (The Guardian, 2010).

Another well-known case is the dismissal of the U.S. network ABC-owned WAAY channel presenter, Shea Allen. She was dismissed in 2013 due to a post published on her own blog (Moran, 2013). In her post "Confessions of a red headed reporter", Shea Allen described her viewpoint over certain issues. The management suggested that she should be removed from the post. The next day Allen only corrected the title: "No Apologies: Confessions of a red headed reporter". She made a foreword to the post and stressed that she would fight to the end for the protection of the freedom of expression. She believed that her post was of a satirical nature and hilarious, thus a breach of the labour contract by that reason was unexpected for her (Allen, 2013).

The first instance of a journalist's dismissal from office in Georgian media for expressing an opinion on the web took place in March 2011. Giorgi Tukhareli and Giorgi Gabrichidze, journalists of GPB's Channel First made insulting comments on Facebook towards religious and sexual minority groups. The application for dismissal was submitted after the director Vakho Sanaia had told them that he did not want to continue working with them (Netgazeti, 2011).

The main subject of the research is social networks as one of the means for receiving information. According to the Oxford dictionaries Social Network (2011)- a dedicated website or other application which enables users to communicate with each other by posting information, comments, messages, images on web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they

share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison B., 2007).

Social networks were considered by Rice (2006) and designated as a space for direct or metaphoric contacts. According to the author, the contact brought to the foreground by social networks would play a major role in content management. Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001) expected that people would use Internet for social activities. Alejandro's (2010) research revealed that journalists are beginning to leverage on social media to receive, gather and distribute news.

Brighnet (2010) says that the new media has replaced a space of public discussion. A public is considered any space where communication is visible and available (Weintraub & Kumareds, 1997). A post published on Facebook is considered public even if only shared with a friend, as one has made the information "available", and no longer controllable as to who will see or use it (Tsuladze et al., 2013). Even if the information placed in a social network is marked as private, it is still available to the social network administrators. And tomorrow, this information may go into the hands of others (Biswajit & Shankar, 2011).

The use of social media by political news journalists was studied in Norway by Rogstad (2013), who found out that social media is mostly used by online media reporters when compared to other types of journalists. The researcher stresses that the majority of political news journalists do not express their opinions regarding politics in social networks, and, in most cases, uses it for private relations and entertainment. Rodstad (2013) also remarks that a small part of journalists that express personal opinions in social networks is occupied with branding themselves in order to become noticeable for others, whereas columnists and editors use social networks for discussion purposes.

Newman (2011) agrees with Rodstad, and adds that individual activity is often more efficient. Expressing viewpoints on the topics a journalist is working on is considered in this context by Podger (2009) that suggest that journalists opt for having private or separate professional pages, the first for "close" people and the second for relations with sources for purposes of getting information and communication with colleagues. The dismissal from office due to expression of opinion on a social network was assessed from a legal point of view by the Georgian lawyer Davit Kldiashvili (2013). In his research Kldiashvili stressed that, on one hand, discrimination in labour relations in terms of viewpoints and opinions is unacceptable, while, one

the other, an expressed opinion should not bring harm to the employer's business reputation. According to Kldiashvili, the best solution to the issue is a self-regulation mechanism for media outlets themselves.

It is also worth mentioning that international standards of ethics do not clearly define the extent to which journalists should express their opinion, in case such expression does not contain hate speech. Using any kind of discriminating terminology is unacceptable by all ethical codes. Discrimination is strictly banned by the legislature of many countries.

But what happens in the case of dealing with a non-discriminating expression? According to Principle 6 of the German Press Council, journalists and publishers shall not perform any activities that could cast doubt on the credibility of the press (German Press Council, 2006). The Code of Croatian Journalists says that a journalist, like any citizen, has a right to political and other commitment. In his work, he respects professional distance toward actual events, which is one of the conditions for objective, professional report on events (Croatian Journalists' Association, 2009).

The Canadian Press Council touches upon the danger of calling the impartiality in question due to the activity of journalists. Its guideline reads "we lose our credibility as fair observers if we write opinion pieces about subjects we also cover as reporters" (The Canadian Association of Journalists, 2011). It is also mentioned therein that

personal online activity, including emails and social networking, should generally be regarded as public and not private. Such activity can influence our professional credibility. As such, we think carefully before we post, and we take special caution in declaring our political leanings online (The Canadian Association of Journalists, 2011).

The British Press Complaint Commission (PCC) (2014) has examined the case of a journalist who, according to the complainant, had posted an insulting comment on Facebook, and judged that the journalist had violated ethical standards. The point is that the complainant contacted the news editor while she was on bereavement leave and expressed disappointment over the fact that his letter had not been published in the newspaper. The editor made several posts regarding the fact on Facebook, including one that said, "I plan to make his life a misery as much as possible", and thus violating with the given statement Clause 4 (Harassment). of Ethics Code (Press Complaints Commission, 1991) When studying the case the newspaper referred to the fact that the post made under personal account of the editor had been seen by a limited

number of people, and that she was, in addition, in a grave emotional state (Press Complaint Commission, 2014).

The Press Council identified a violation of ethical standards and stressed that a journalist must observe ethical standards at all times, even in social networks. Charlotte Dewar, Director of the Complaints and Pre-publication Services at the PCC, said “There is not always a clear line between the personal and professional. Journalists must take care when discussing professional relationships, including on social media” (Press Complaint Commission, 2014). Apart from self-regulation bodies and NGOs, a number of international news media also have their own guidelines. For instance, the BBC (2011) in its recommendations says that its journalist should always keep in mind that he/she represents the BBC.

“Remember that even though you are acting in your own personal capacity, you are on show to your friends and anyone else who sees what you write, as a representative of the BBC. If you are editorial staff, it doesn't make much difference whether or not you identify yourself as someone who works for the BBC” (British Broadcasting Company, 2011).

The American broadcasting company NPR has a similar recommendation. It does not set apart online activity from public conduct and says that a journalist should realize that every element of his conduct might reflect on NPR. Moreover, for that reason they should not do anything that may bring harm to the news organization's credibility and reputation. According to its Ethics Handbook, journalists do not express personal views on a political or other controversial issue that they could not write for the air or post on NPR.org (National Public Radio, 2012).

In 2013 the U.S. news agency Associated Press adopted special the “Social Media Guidelines for AP Employees” which clearly state that the news media organization members should refrain from expressing their viewpoint in social networks, as well as on forums and blogs, with respect to public issues. They must realize that such expression may damage the reputation of the organization. In light of the fact that international standards do not separate means of expression from one another, it is therefore irrelevant whether an opinion is expressed through a newspaper or social networks. It is no longer a subject of contention that such resources represent a public space, regardless of whether a published post is marked as “public”, or is available to the friends or followers being in the poster contact list.

Therefore, the goal of the research was to analyze whether the impartiality of media outlets is being endangered when a journalist posts or writes comments on the subject he is working on,

and how fair is it to dismiss a journalist from office by that reason if the contract does not give a provision for dismissal for such a reason. There were two research questions:

RQ1: Do journalists violate the self-regulations standards when they use their own walls on social networks for expressing personal views about the topic they are working on?

RQ2: Is it fair to fire a journalist after expressing personal opinions in social networks about the topic he is covering?

The research hypothesis was the following: a journalist's expression of his viewpoint on socio-political issues in social networks violates the impartiality standard. Despite the limit of the research, several positions have been outlined. However, regarding a number of issues, for instance, in what case the impartiality standard is violated as a result of journalist's expression of opinion in social network, no definite position has been identified. Due to the varying approach towards the issue posed in the research, it is necessary to carry out a more comprehensive research on that issue in the future. It is important to learn the opinion of the editors of other types of media outlets (television, radio), as well as that of ordinary journalists. It will be interesting to find out whether they share the stance of the management concerning the issue of research or not.

After that, taking into consideration the international practice, it will already be possible to prepare guidelines on the research issues. And that would help media outlets work out a uniform approach towards journalists' activity in social networks. In addition, the opinion of the reader is important, as well as knowing the degree to which the reader considers a journalist as biased when reading in a social network his viewpoint on the ongoing events. Therefore, it is necessary to implement focus groups, and that the issue is studied also from the point of view of the audience so that a full picture can be established.

Research methodology

As the goal of the research was to define whether or not journalists' statements and expression on social networks violated ethical standards, a qualitative research method was been selected as the research methodology, the in-depth interview. Those that have participated in the research were the editors of four online news media: Maia Metskhvarishvili (Netgazeti.ge), Zura Vardiashvili (Liberali.ge), Davit Chikhladze (Tavisufleba.org) and Marika Bochoridze (News.ge). The Selecting criteria were that these publications are regarded as the most influential

socio-political content producers in Georgia. Therewith, Netgazeti and Radio Tavisupleba represent the exception in the Georgian media, which prohibits its journalists expressing viewpoints on the issues they work on. Tavisupleba is Radio Freedom's Georgian Bureau, therefore it is important to determine whether or not there is a difference in terms of prohibiting expression in social networks between journalists working in local (Georgian) and international media.

Liberali, yet another organization included in the research, got into a scandal after one of its journalists had made an insulting post on a social network with regards to a political party, for which the publication had to release its apologies (Z.Vardiashvili, Personal Communication, 2014). Therefore, it is interesting if the editor's viewpoint has been changed after the incident, and if a certain regulation has been imposed in this direction. Based on a very basic observation, despite the fact that the popular online edition News.ge frequently uses in its materials viewpoints expressed by other persons on Facebook, its own journalists do not engage in activity in social networks. Accordingly, it was important to include the editor of News.ge into the research, also in order to find out the publication's viewpoint regarding the issues of research and what instructions are given to their journalists.

The four news media outlets producing social and political content described above were meeting the research criteria and hence were selected for the study. The editors were polled in the period between 1 to 10 March 2014. The research was replicated a year after in order to provide analysis of whether or not their attitude towards the issues of research had been changed during the period. Repeated interviews with the news outlets editors participating in the research were conducted in the period of 20 to 30 March 2015, and they had to ask the same questions. As the editor of News.ge was changed in that period and Inga Bajelidze took the post. She was therefore the one interviewed instead of the former editor, Marika Bochiridze.

Experts in the area of study of the research were also polled and include: Tamar Rukhadze (executive director of the Charter of Journalistic Ethics), Ucha Seturi (head of IDFI media and telecommunication director), Natia Kuprashvili (executive director of the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters), Davit Kldiashvili (lawyer, secretary of the Charter of Journalistic Ethics council), Natia Kapanadze (Georgian Young Lawyers' Association board member), Ana Keshelashvili (professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs), Tamar Kintsurashvili (head of the Media Development Foundation board). Each of them represents an organization that

works in the media sector and has an in-depth expertise in media ethics matters. It is also important that they do not represent any media outlet, and thus it was presumed that they would not judge based on the point of view of their respective media outlet and would be more objective. For the purposes of opinion diversification, the persons selected as experts were both journalists and lawyers.

In-depths interviews were conducted in the period of 1 to 10 March 2015, and held face to face. All the questions were of open-ended, so the respondents were free during the process of answering the questions. The interviews with the editors dealt with the following issues: do they consider social networks a public space? Has the editorial board any type of restriction imposed upon the employees' activity in social networks? Should their employees express their opinion in social networks on issues they are work on? Interviews conducted with the experts contained questions on the following issues: is there a violation of ethical standard when journalists express their opinion on topics they are working on? How fair is it to dismiss from office for such expression, and how should the issue be regulated?

Research Results

The research has revealed that journalists of the participant media outlets use social networks not only for searching respondents, but also for expressing their viewpoints on topics they are covering. Due to the fact that nothing is said regarding this issue in the ethical regulations existing in the country, the news media outlets in Georgia do not have a uniform approach and either impose restrictions of various forms upon journalists for the expression of viewpoints in social networks, or do not restrict it altogether.

In the majority of cases, news media organization and journalists have a verbal agreement that states that journalists would not express their viewpoint on the ongoing issues. Social networks are considered a public space; hence, an opinion expressed therein is regarded as a public statement.

Nearly all the participants of the research share the idea that a journalist's expression of his viewpoint in social networks regarding the topic he/she is working on endangers the impartiality of the media outlet. Several arguments were brought forward as to why the predisposition towards journalist may change in this case.

The main factor is that the reader always associates journalists with the news outlet they work for, and therefore when they provide assessments of a certain event or express their attitude towards a respondent, the reader becomes predisposed to think that the journalist is biased. It has always been considered a serious problem in media when the reader considered a news outlet as a partial side. The development of technology has, in the meantime, facilitated the reaching wider audiences. Social networks have made it easier to express one's viewpoint, especially in the case of a person that has many followers. Accordingly, when a journalist expresses a viewpoint and then engages into a discussion with the audience through commenting, it is easier for the reader to consider the news outlet such journalist is working for as one sharing their opinion, being on their side, or representing the opposite.

Respondents also lose their confidence in a news outlet when they know that a journalist representing the given media outlet has a negative attitude towards them. This, without doubt, also brings harm to the news media organization. Instead of expressing of a viewpoint, a journalist can prepare a material on the same topic and present it from the angle that he believes to be best for depicting the existing problem. If there still remains something for a journalist to say, then he may opt for a journalist genre such as the column. Activity in a social network may be identified with an activity such as participation in various rallies, signing of petitions, and so on. This is also considered unacceptable because of the protection of the impartiality.

Due to the circumstances described above, journalists should know that their freedom of expression, apart from people of other profession, is to a certain extent restricted in a public space, including social networks. However, it is important to consider the type of news media we are referring to, for example when it deals with a media outlet that has declared its support towards certain power or ideology. In this case the viewpoint expressed by a journalist of such edition is less of a problem for the reader, as there is a knowledge that the whole media group shares the given opinion, and the reader is free to decide whether to receive the information or not.

In Georgia there is no uniform approach as to whether a journalistic contract should state that journalists must refrain from expressing their viewpoint, or whether ethical standards by themselves imply the protection of impartiality, and, therefore, a journalist is not exempt from restriction of such expression in conditions when no special regulations exist. The research revealed that even if a labour contract really contains a record regarding restriction of expression

in social networks, it is important to see what kind of definition it has. For instance, if a contract reads that an employee is prohibited to make “inappropriate” comments in social networks, or express a viewpoint, which damages the reputation of the organization, then it leaves a window for wide interpretation and may be improperly used by an employee.

Therefore, for the purpose of excluding manipulation, it is important that media organizations develop social media policy defining the limits of employees’ competence. Whereas a labour contract will provide for a concrete description regarding the type of activity, an employee is banned to pursue it on social networks. For instance, it can be defined the following way: “expressing viewpoint regarding a respondent”, “making comment on a working topic” or similar.

Three of the five news media outlets participating in the research stated that they do not have a concrete guideline for their employees concerning the activity in social networks, and that is the internal regulation that prohibits them to express their viewpoints on ongoing events. A special regulation is applied to Tavisupleba journalists, which reads that “utmost prudence is required to prevent from a conflict of interests, both in a broadcasting space and outside it – with respect to private individuals, groups, political or commercial interests” (D.Chikhladze, personal communication, 3 March 2014). D. Chikhladze, one of the editors of Radio Tavisupleba, believes that journalists should use media profiles mainly for spreading their own materials and not for making comments on those topics. “People must have confidence in journalists, as well as in their social media profiles” (personal communication, 3 March 2014).

In contrast to 2014, D. Chikhladze no longer does such assessments in 2015, saying that it is the internal regulation that restrict him to publicly express his opinion, and confirms that journalists of Radio Tavisupleba have a liability to observe ethical principles not only in journalistic materials, but also in social networks (D. Chikhladze, personal communication, 21 March 2015).

Netgazeti is yet another news medium that prohibits its journalists to express their opinion on ongoing issues. Editor M. Metskhvarishvili says that the reporters are warned from the very beginning that they will be dismissed in the case of providing assessment of a certain issue (M.Metskhvarishvili, personal communication, 24 March 2015). M. Metskhvarishvili also considers expression of viewpoint in social networks as an activity similar to signing of petitions and participation in demonstrations, and says that as participation in such activities is a support

of certain stance, the same happens in the case of expression on social networks, making the reader predisposed towards a certain interpretation. “We will cover and prepare journalistic materials, and inform people regarding what’s going on. We believe that the involvement in activism is a duty of other people” (M. Metskhvarishvili, personal communication, 24 March 2015). The only thing that Netgazeti does not prohibit its journalists in terms of expression and participation in a rally is when it deals with the restriction of journalistic activity, freedom of media, or similar issues (M.Metskhvarishvili, personal communication, 24 March 2015).

Also Liberali has verbal recommendations on refraining from sharp expression of one’s opinion regarding the ongoing events. Its director, Z. Vardiashvili says that they had taken the decision after several journalists criticized political party in a social network, due to which the news media outlet had to make apology afterwards (personal communication, 5 March 2014). It is stupid to argue that their journalists should not have those positions, yet for the purposes of taking care of the degree of confidence, they should rather make less circulation of them. (Z.Vardiashvili, personal communication, 5 March 2014). On the same question asked in 2015, he makes emphasis on radical assessments and sharp expression of one’s position. On the question, whether or not should journalists express their opinion in social networks on issues they are working on, Zura Vardiashvili responds – “it depends on the issue, and the sharpness of journalist’s assessment” (personal communication, 26 March 2015). He says that if previously he considered journalistic expression of opinion on any issues unacceptable, he now believes that journalists may also provide their judgment on fundamental values, for instance saying that homophobia is bad, or that they condemn terrorists killing children.

“The main thing is not to be affiliated with a certain person or power. That definitely harms the credibility of the publication”- Vardiashvili says (personal communication, 26 March 2015). News.ge does not have a restriction either, though its editor I. Bajelidze believes that it is better for journalists to refrain from expressing their viewpoints (personal communication, 20 March 2015). Her position coincides with that of the now former News.ge editor, M. Bochoridze (personal communication, 9 March 2014). Netgazeti.ge’s editor M. Metskhvarishvili’s opinion in 2014 suggested it was important that editors manage to reconcile positions and approach towards ethical issues related to the Internet, so that a uniform standard can be developed (personal communication, 7 March 2014). M. Metskhvarishvili repeated the same opinion in 2015 too (personal communication, 24 March 2015). “A large scale effort should be implemented to

summarize everyone's experience to work out a guideline in the end, which of course will be updated periodically, parallel to the development of technology" – M. Metskhvarishvili stressed (personal communication, 24 March 2015)

Her opinion is partially shared by Z. Vardiashvili (personal communication, 26 March 2015), which says that it would not be bad if such guidelines existed, though the achievement of a news media outlet's reliability does not require any separate recommendation. In case the credibility is questioned due to the expression of a certain journalist, the resolution of such an issue should be in the interests of the publication itself, and does not need additional regulations (Z.Vardiashvili, personal communication, 26 March 2015).

The editors' answers to the questions asked in 2015 were almost identical to those of 2014. A little difference was identified in the case of Z. Vardiashvili, whose position in 2015 with respect to journalists' expression in social networks was a little bit softer, as compared to the one he had in 2014. This time he considered it acceptable to express opinion on certain issues (Z.Vardiashvili, personal communication, 26 March 2015). No difference has been identified in the case of the news.ge, which changed editors during the year.

Apart from the editors, all the experts share the same position. They believe that social networks represent a public space, so an opinion expressed therein, on topics a journalist is covering, casts doubt on both his and media outlet's impartiality, just as it would happen in the case of making a public speech. According to D. Kldiashvili (personal communication, 1 March 2015), when a journalist writes negatively about a public figure or politician, and two days later reads the material prepared on the given person, his attitude, as that of a reader, is changed and becomes biased.

N. Kuprashvili (personal communication, 3 March 2015) as well shares his opinion and says that journalists' expression of their opinion on the ongoing events influences the audience.

"Those sharing the viewpoint of a journalist regard him as one being on their side, and in case of not sharing the opinion, the journalist is associated with the opposite side. When a journalist is regarded as a side that does not reflect positively on the confidence in media. The entire experience of media prior to social networks provides clear evidence of that" (N. Kuprashvili, personal communication, 3 March 2015).

T. Rukhadze's viewpoint (personal communication, 5 March 2015) in this respect suggests that the issue arises when a journalist's activity goes beyond the editorial policy. If a media outlet openly declares support towards a certain ideology or a party, and its journalist

expresses an opinion coinciding with the editorial policy, then the issue does not exist. Nevertheless, in the case of the opposite situation, such a post may become a problem for the entire organization (personal communication, 5 March 2015). “A news outlet will find it very difficult to prove that a journalist making biased statements in a public space will be impartial in his materials. The best standard in my opinion is not do anything in a public space that you wouldn’t do in your own journalistic product”, - T. Rukhadze says (personal communication, 5 March 2015).

A. Keshelashvili (personal communication, 2 March 2015) agrees that such statements of journalists harm the impartiality of publication. She relates such behaviour to the lack of journalist’s responsibility. She, however, considers it acceptable for a journalist to use his material in the form of a column in the media outlet he/she works for, in case he/she (columnist or reporter) wants to spread additional information or a point of view that hasn’t been included his journalistic product (A.Keshelashvili, personal communication, 2 March 2015). Natia Kapanadze shares the same stance, considering a personal/opinion column the best option, when a journalist wants to express his opinion (A. Keshelashvili, personal communication, 2 March 2015).

The viewpoint of T. Kintsurashvili (personal communication, 9 March 2015) differs a little for that matter, as she sees no problem in journalists expressing their opinion in a social network. According to her, the audience itself decides whether or not to trust such a media outlet. As an example, she refers to media outlets whose founders are associated with a political party, including Tabula (the founder’s husband is one of the leaders of the United National Movement) and Objective (founders are currently leaders of the Partners Alliance political party) (T.Kintsurashvili, personal communication, 9 March 2015).

“It’s up to a respondent what he decides to do. Yet that has a certain influence, of course. The journalist makes a choice and carries a responsibility not only for him or herself, but also for the employer, the society, and profession. There are many factors which the journalist has to analyze,”- T. Kintsurashvili stresses (personal communication, 9 March 2015) and adds that in order to assess the objectivity it is important to know how the media product is prepared, whether the fact is separated from the opinion therein or not. (T.Kintsurashvili, personal communication, 9 March 2015). Despite that, according to the experts, media outlets’

impartiality is endangered when a journalist expresses viewpoint in a social network, but they consider it unacceptable to dismiss the journalist from office due to that reason.

They believe that the contract should provide for such a provision, or a journalist should be given a notice of the possibility of dismissal in the case of such conduct. T. Rukhadze (personal communication, 5 March 2015), identifies unethical expression in a social network with a mistake made during an air, and says that such expression may be of a similar graveness. However, irrespective of whether a media outlet has any kind of restriction or not, journalists should behave in compliance with their inner ethics (T.Rukhadze, personal communication, 5 March 2015).

A. Keshelashvili (personal communication, 2 March 2015) believes that a contract does not provide for such a restriction, and that doesn't exempt a journalist from irresponsible expression in social networks, which may bring harm to the publication's reputation (A.Keshelashvili, personal communication, 2 March 2015). T. Kintsurashvili and N. Kuprashvili share her opinion, saying that in case a journalist is given a preliminary notice of the restriction, there will not be questions and feeling of unfairness. They consider the insertion of such regulations as a preventing mechanism for that kind of manipulation (T.Kintsurashvili, N.Kuprashvili, personal communication, 2 March 2015).

There is very little difference between the opinion of lawyer experts and journalists with respect to the issue. However, the lawyers tend to consider to a greater extent that any kind of restriction must necessarily be provided for in the contract, as the given document is a confirmation that any kind of restriction and terms are reconciled with both parties.

According to U. Seturi (personal communication, 7 March 2015), there is a danger in the *post facto* dismissal, as it may entail manipulation and retribution on the part of the employer. He also speaks about the responsibility of a journalist and stresses that a person choosing the given profession should realize that his space for expression would be partially restricted (personal communication, 7 March 2015). D. Kldiashvili (personal communication, 1 March 2015) in turn believes that the assessment and relevant discussion of a decision taken by the employer should be based on that concrete case. In the case a journalist criticizes his own news media organization on social networks, in such conditions labour law comes into play, which says that in case cooperation between the sides is impossible to take place, then working relations between the sides may terminated.

“Any media outlet is a commercial entity, which takes care of its business reputation, therefore, if an employee discredits its image, that automatically implies the impossibility of continuing working relations”, says Davit Kldiashvili (personal communication, 1 March 2015). He adds that if a journalist has expressed his opinion regarding other topics, while not knowing that the publication had imposed restrictions, in this case the legal base does not enable to dismiss the journalist. An employee should clearly understand that he might be dismissed in such a case (D.Kldiashvili, personal communication, 1 March 2015)

D. Kldiashvili (personal communication, 1 March, 2015) also speaks about the discrimination of opinion, stressing that a person should not be dismissed or placed in an impaired condition on the basis of a statement made on religious, ethnical, sexual topics. “For instance, a journalist is working on a socio-political subject and declares support to LGBT persons, dismissal on that ground will be a discrimination”, D. Kldiashvili adds (personal communication, 1 March 2015).

For N. Kapanadze (personal communication, 9 March 2015), in case an employer decides that a comment made by a journalist in a social network is unacceptable, the breach of working relations with the journalists by that reason cannot be substantiated.

“In this case they can present additional contracts to journalists, reconcile terms, make a review of the contract and provide permanent control,” N. Kapanadze says (personal communication, 9 March 2015). Activity on a social network may be subject to control in the same way as participation of journalists to a rally, the signature of a petition, and other activities defined by media outlets (N.Kapanadze, personal communication, 9 March 2015). T. Rukhadze (personal communication, 9 March 2015) stated that restricting journalists’ activity on social networks should be in the interests of news media outlet, as the reader identifies a journalist with the brand he represents, thus the journalist’s statements are directly regarded as the position of that television or newspaper. Such circumstance will damage the news media organization in the first place. (T.Rukhadze, personal communication, March, 2015).

Conclusion

The hypothesis – that the impartiality standard is violated by a journalist’s expression of his/her viewpoint on social networks on socio-political subjects, has partially been confirmed. Editors of Georgian news media outlets believe that it is better for a journalist to refrain from expressing his

viewpoint on social networks on subjects he/she is working on. However, there is no uniform standard in this respect, and the editors participating in the research have different opinions. For instance, Netgazeti.ge and Radio Tavisupleba strictly limit expression of one's viewpoint in a social network. The journalists of the given news media outlets know that such expression may entail their dismissal from their position. In the case of other news media organizations, the issue is considered based on each concrete incident and no concrete agreement exists in this respect.

Such approach may leave space for manipulation to the employer - as it may dismiss a journalist without warning due to the fact that the latter has expressed a certain opinion on a social network, which according to the employer has brought harm to the impartiality of the publisher. The experts also speak about such danger. They suggest that in order to prevent manipulation and the taking of subjective decisions on the part of the employer, it is necessary that a social media policy should be in place, which would clearly define the types of restrictions imposed upon journalists. Dismissal from office without preliminary warning is unacceptable. However, a journalist is not exempted from protecting the impartiality standard in the case when no such agreement exists in the news media outlet.

The necessity of such a document is confirmed by the fact that all the editors and experts admit that the impartiality standard may indeed be violated in the case when a journalist working for a news media organization makes a sharp statement on a topic he is working on.

The results of the research have shown that part of those polled consider the activity on social networks as a public expression, and identify it with activities such as participation in various rallies or the signing of petitions, which is also restricted by media outlets. Expression on social networks may become a support of certain issue, which may entail predisposition during the preparation of news and reports.

All the respondents participating in the research believe that it is desirable that guidelines of the use of social media existed in Georgia, upon which the representatives of media would reconcile, and would jointly work out the given guideline, as it has been the case with the development of the eleven principles of the Charter of Journalistic Ethics. Such rules will reduce the risk of manipulation, while the journalists themselves would be informed, and will regard the activity in a social network with greater responsibility.

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