

INTERNET USAGE ON MOBILE DEVICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON EVOLUTION OF INFORMATIVE WEBSITES IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The computer is the main tool used to get information from the Internet. However, recent developments show that he is losing ground fast enough in relation to new forms of access to internet, such are smartphones or tablets. Technological developments, such as 3G or 4G devices enable mobile users to have the same speed Internet with broadband network users. Official data from the Agency for Electronic and Postal Communications of Albania (AKEP) shows an increase of 90 per cent of mobile phone devices that have access to the 3G network from 2012 to the 2013 and 2014, reflecting the high number of potential users of the informative sites from mobile. This study aims to highlight the mobile devices, as a new channels used by internet users in Albania to reach informative websites and also by analyzing changes that these websites made to fit this new trend. The study will try to demonstrate through statistical indicators, the significant increase in clicks from mobile to informative websites and to answer questions on the factors that have led to this increase.

Keywords: Mobile users, Albania, internet, informative websites, smartphones.

INTRODUCTION

Albania has faced major technological changes over the last decade, changes that have influenced the behavior of citizens in various areas. At first, the facilitated communication with mobile phones and after that exchanging data through improved services, lower prices and the increase of the number of smartphones (mobile phone devices) has changed and is changing the access of citizens of different age groups to information as well as getting online services.

The penetration of internet more and more every day is also happening due to the growing number of smartphone mobile devices in the hands of citizens, who then use them to access different websites, like the informative ones. This year, the number of mobile phones users is expected to rise up to 7 billion, with a penetration of 97% in the whole world, compared with 738 millions in 2000 (ITU, 2015). Meanwhile the penetration of internet globally for the period 2000-2015 increased 7 times, from 6.5% to 43%. Among different devices to access the internet, one of the most dynamic markets is that of broadband internet through mobile phones, which grew by 45 percent during 2015 (ITU, 2015).

Statistics show that internet penetration in Albania is calculated around 60 percent, or 0.3 percent of the users in Europe, while it is estimated that each inhabitant uses on average two mobile phones (Rapaj, 2015: 9). The highest growth rate of Internet penetration in Albania has been through mobile phones. By the end of 2014, 1.4 million inhabitants had access in the internet through their mobile phones (AKEP, 2015: 21) The number of subscribers with

broadband access from fixed networks at the end of 2014, amounted to about 207 thousand, compared to 183 thousand in 2013, representing an annual increase of 13.3% (AKEP, 2015). In this context of major changes in the mobile phone market and the exchange of data, the online information market also developed, where enterprises and individuals began to invest in this direction in the early 2000s.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As one of the most dispersed communication tools in the world today, the mobile phone technology has a growing impact on the social and cultural aspect of everyday life of individuals (Campbell & Kwak, 2011). Also, the adoption of the mobile phone to serve information or consumption of information can also be seen as an innovation stimulated by several factors, such as technological, social and psychological ones (Conhill, 2014).

Advantaged by the ongoing technological improvements in terms of communication, cellphones expanded their range of functioning enabling this way a perfect Internet access. The huge prevalence of smartphones completely changed the information terrain (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qiu, & Sey, 2006). Meanwhile, to adapt to such developments, traditional organizations of information and other similar units, whose activity is based in information, are trying to respond to the interest of the audience with reliable information in real time and easily accessible (Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Amy Mitchell, 2011).

This is because communication through cellphones is being used in various forms, by often replacing even communication or traditional attitudes of the persons or people involved in communication (Green, 2002). Studies that have analyzed communication with cellphones by sending text messages, calls or by accessing internet, are extremely popular, but with the prevalence of smartphones, there is a strong increase in the use of applications related to information, something that will continue in the next five years (Fidler, 2014b). Mobile devices will give citizens of developed and developing countries the opportunity to be informed. The expansion of technological capabilities of mobile phones in terms of access to information is causing huge changes to traditional information platforms (Meikle & Redden, 2010).

Information agencies in the whole world have made and still make important investments to facilitate access to information from mobile devices for their followers (Westlund, 2013), meanwhile this major change in this information tool is becoming a huge part of the world literature on communication (Westlund, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The study aims to highlight the change of direction of the source of clicks in online media from the PC to mobile devices. In this context, the study also aims to highlight the obligation of online media to adjust to this new reality, by making improvements to the contents of websites, their structure as well as their management system. The study makes a direct link between the increasing percentage of subscribers who access the Internet via mobile devices and the percentage of clicks that comes from mobile devices to informative websites.

To reach to this conclusion, there has been a comparison of companies data related to subscribers who have Internet access through their mobile phones as well as data from major online websites in Albania on the source of clicks.

In this paper, the term "subscriber" is used for persons who use a SIM card of one of the four mobile phones companies operating in the Republic of Albania, like "Telekom Albania", "Vodafone Albania", "Eagle Mobile" and "Plus Communications". As an "active mobile phone user", are categorized all those users whose numbers have been recharged with credit and make calls till the moment of reporting. The number of internet users in Albania increased significantly after the number portability service was offered, the introduction of 3G and 4G services and other technological improvements made by mobile phones companies and those of internet.

In the paper, there has been a combination of the increasing number of internet users through mobile phones and their access to news through these phones, by highlighting the growing number of websites clicks that come from cellphones in the news websites in Albania. In this context, we have studied the behavior of websites' administrator in terms of managing and maximizing the growing traffic from mobile devices through technical changes but also changes in their page contents.

MOBILE PHONE MARKET IN ALBANIA

The first GSM license in Albania was given in May of 1996 and Albania became one of the first countries in the region to offer such service. But despite that, it took another 4 years, until 2000, for the mobile phones market to expand in the whole country. Until this period, Albanian Mobile Communication (AMC) was a state-owned company (QPZ, 2010). The huge change happened in the early 2000, when Cosmote/Telenor consortium bought 85 % of the AMC shares for 85.6 million euros, thus becoming one of the first foreign serious investments in the country. The Albanian state had 12.5 percent of the shares, which were bought again by Cosmote in 2009 for 48.2 million euros, while 2.5 % remained to the employees (Zoto, 2012: 58).

Also in this period, in the middle of 2001, Vodafone also entered the market. The growth of this sector accelerated in 2008-2009 and a third company entered the market. In the end of 2008 Eagle Mobile had 260 thousand subscribers, and in 2009, 480,604 subscribers (QPZ, 2010). The introduction on the market of Eagle Mobile significantly increased competition in the market by lowering the price of communication through mobile devices. The competition among operators was going to increase even further, with the granting of the license for a fourth operator, "Plus Communications" in 2009, which activity started in 2010, while the introduction of the number portability service two years later, would increase further the competition among companies, enabling citizens to benefit from a significant decrease of communication prices, especially those on internet.

INTERNET, 3G AND 4G SERVICES

By the end of 2014, 38 percent of mobile phone users have had access to the 3G internet service, while data exchange increased by 148 percent compared to 2013 (Rapaj, 2015: 9). The number of mobile phones subscribers who have used broadband access from mobile networks and USB/Modem in 2014, was 1.6 million or 16 percent higher than in 2013. The use of broadband access from 3G networks has increased by 59 percent for access through USB/Modem and by 12 percent through mobile phones (AKEP, 2015: 40).

3G service in Albania was first offered by Vodafone Albania in January 2011. Vodafone Albania won the tender organized by the Agency for Electronic and Postal Communications

in November 2010, with an offered price of 31.4 million euros (AKEP, 2010). Currently, the company covers with such service 99 % of the territory of the country (Vodafone, 2010). The second 3G license was won by "AMC" company, which offered 15.9 million euros (Albeu.com, 2011). AMC Mobile offered in early 2012, services of high-speed 3G (Telekom Albania).

Besides the persistence of mobile phones companies for 3G licenses to be given at reasonable prices, taking into consideration the market in the country, AKEP decided again to call for bids for the third 3G license in July 2012. The first procedure failed, while in the second one, held in October 2012, Eagle Mobile was declared a winner, for offering 4.3 million euros. Meanwhile the fourth company, Plus Communications won the tender for the fourth 3G license by buying it for 2.97 million Euros.

In 2013, it was observed a major shift of subscribers who had access in the internet through GPRS/EDGE service or 2G, to the broad band, 3G. The number of subscribers who had access in the internet through 2G network in 2012 was 1 380 584, meanwhile this number was halved in 2013, decreasing to just 713 559 subscribers (AKEP, 2014b). Meanwhile in 2013, there is a huge increase of 90 % compared to 2012 of subscribers that access the internet through the 3G network, a number which has increased to 1 119 892 subscribers from 594 308 it was a year ago (AKEP, 2014a).

The same growing trend of 3G users when it comes to amount terms, it is not seen in the first half of 2014. The number of subscribers with a 3G broadband access from their mobile phones was around 1.2 million by the end of 2014"(AKEP, 2014b). The decrease of active SIM users as well as the subscribers with access to the 3G network during the late 2013 and early 2014 is explained with the competition among mobile phone companies during this period, which was characterized by offers from inside and outside the network with minutes in communication, internet or even unlimited texts. This way, keeping two or more SIM cards to benefit from companies offers was seen as unnecessary by subscribers, who have fulfilled their service needs by just one company.

Meanwhile, in 2015, AKEP has granted also 4G licenses. In September 1st 2015, three operators like "Vodafone Albania", "Telekom Albania" and "Albtelecom" have begun offering this service at the same time (Mapo, 2015).

COMPETITION BETWEEN COMPANIES EXPANDED INTERNET ACCESS

The introduction of the fourth mobile operator "Eagle Mobile" in the market in 2008, increased the quality of Internet service on one hand but also reduced the cost of this service for citizens, something which was reflected with an increase of Internet users. According to the International Telecommunication Union, the percentage of individuals who had access to the Internet service in 2008 was 23 percent, while in 2010 it reached 45 percent. Meanwhile, by the middle of 2015, it is reported that 60 percent of Albanians have internet access (ITU, 2015). This figure is equal to that of Montenegro and is smaller than that of Greece, where 63 percent of the population has internet access. Also, Macedonia has a coverage of 68 %, while Serbia 53 percent.

By the end of 2014, were registered 3.4 million active mobile users. The competition between companies offering huge amounts of minutes and internet access inside the network, caused for a huge number of SIM cards to burst out of use because subscribers focused on

communicating within their mobile network.

NEWS ACCESS THROUGH MOBILE PHONES

The expansion of Internet use as well as 3G services through mobile devices is associated with an increase of clicks through these appliances in websites. Statistical data of some of the biggest online websites in Albania, obtained during interviews with their administrators indicate that approximately 35% of the clicks are generated from mobile devices. This is an average figure, which changes from time to time and from one website to the other, depending on their content and technical facilities offered to stimulate access via mobile phones.

Online news websites taken into consideration for the performance of the source of clicks during the years 2012-2013-2014 are: www.balkanweb.com; www.albeu.com; www.panorama.com.al, www.shekulli.com.al, and www.gazetatema.net.

Referring to the data provided by the Google Analytics for the above websites, it turns out that besides the fact that 35% of the clicks are generated by mobile devices during 2014 they have had an increase of 45% compared with 2013. The website presented with the highest increase of clicks from mobile devices is "Albeu.com", which in 2012 had only 11.8% of its readers connecting via their mobile phones, while by the end of 2014, the percentage of readers who accessed the website from their cellphones, increased to 46.8 percent. Balkanweb.com news website also has increased significantly their clicks from mobile phones during the last three years, by going from 13.1% in 2012 to 39.7 percent in the end of 2014, similar indicators also appear for "Shekulli Online" or "Tema Online", which are supplements to the printed newspapers.

The increasing number of mobile devices, the wide access and cheap prices on the Internet during the period 2012-2014, forced websites' administrators take measures to facilitate the online navigation through mobile devices by facilitating site scripts or by introducing the mobile version. Albeu.com website introduced its mobile version in the second quarter of 2013, something that was reflected with a strong increase of clicks from cellphones during the previous year. Panorama Online is the last of online newspapers to have introduced the mobile version. The editor of "Panorama Online" Adi Shkempi has said that "with the introduction of the new design we are also offering the mobile version of the website, so that readers entering from their mobile phones can navigate easily" (Shkempi, 2015).

FINDINGS

From the observation of the analytical data of some online news websites and major online newspapers in the country, a change can be noticed in the design and content of those media especially created for information compared to the online version of traditional newspapers. Especially created online news websites like Albeu.com, are more inclined to follow the technological improvements compared to the online version of traditional newspapers such as "Shekulli Online" or "Panorama Online".

Meanwhile, online news websites which have introduced their mobile version, have had a further increase of clicks coming from mobile phones. The observation carried out shows that online news websites which have introduced this version, have had an increase of 45 percent

of clicks coming from mobile phones in the first year of this service. Such fact is also influenced by the increasing clicks coming via social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. The number of visitors entering the news websites via social networks from their mobile phones is 50 % higher than that of visitors also entering via social networks but from their PC. In the case of Albeu.com, 67 percent of visitors entering via social networks connect through their mobile phones.

Also it was noted that websites that have a large number of clicks via mobile devices have a smaller number of words per news or content compared with online websites that are clicked mostly through Computers. Online news pages are rushing to introduce their mobile versions, by expecting a further increase of readers entering from their mobile phones in the time to come.

PËRFUNDIME

The introduction in the market of the third mobile phone company, “Eagle Mobile” in 2008, led to an increase in competition in the market and therefore, the reduce of prices of such service for customers, making Internet an accessible service to a large number of Albanians. The figures of the Authority of Electronic and Postal Communications (AKEP) which by the end of 2014, speak of 1.2 million users of broadband internet via their mobile phones and USB cards, while in 2010 this figure was just 260 thousand, are a clear indicator of drastic changes in the market.

Forced by the rapid technological changes, which have changed the behavior of consumers as well as information requirements, news websites have been forced to align their content and format in accordance with the new reality created in the online media market. The fast introduction of mobile version, but also the adaptation of the site design to facilitate navigation through mobile devices reflect the administrators' approach to meet the demands and expectations of readers.

It has been noticed that readers entering the websites through their mobile phones stay connected for a shorter time compared to those who enter the website from their PC. The same phenomenon is also noticed in the number of browsed interfaces, where online news websites which have a high percentage of visitors via mobile phones, have a smaller number of browsed interfaces compared to websites which have a high number of visitors via PC. In this context, some online websites have cut their text content, and have added images through galleries and videos to extend the time readers stay in their websites.

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