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## **The Social Work at the Cross-Roads. How Can the Media be a Helping Hand?**

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### **Abstract**

Societies are drifting towards conditions of inequality, poverty and exploitation because of the group to which they belong. In Albania, the risks of the deepening split between the groups and the increasing need for social assistance is now clearer than ever.

The actors involved in social work, in their efforts to affirm the need and the professional identity of social work, encounter some rather big challenges. These efforts are supported to a very limited extent by external actors and face difficulties in reaching their target group. The need for social work policies and action form a chain of messages which goes through a communication channel. In this channel, on the way from sender to receiver, the message itself seems to lose power and importance. Why? Among many answers, one seems to prevail: The Media negligence. Media representation of social work appears to be the weakest link in the communication chain from policy makers to those who benefit from the social work system. And it requires stronger attention and research on how to make media an ally of social work support, rather than an obstacle for the profession, which is also the focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** social work, media representation, coverage.

### **Introduction**

In developing countries with long transition periods, media tends to be focused in political activities, even during non-election times. Media content and coverage in these cases is not directly linked to policy planning and policy dialogue but in stories surrounding politicians as individuals, rather than policy-makers. Albania is no exception. Political capture and institutional uncertainty dominate media content, whilst the audience appears to be interested in being informed about changes and policies in issues that affect their life directly, such as employment, social welfare, education, domestic violence, life security, etc. Nevertheless, when it comes to having online or televised media debates about concrete policies in supporting social work related policies, no interest is shown by the media. Nor by the policy makers. With an excessive coverage of daily politics which does not affect or improve the lives of its citizens, the Albanian media ignores at large social work needs and opportunities.

In the area of technology, quick information and fast flow of communication, media has become a very important player. What happens in social work can hardly be recognized outside its circle; likewise, the needs from public side for social work intervention remain invisible and unknown if media chooses to be neglecting and not cooperative in giving space to Social Work struggles.

Politics of the day dominates media coverage in transition countries and in Albania, the increased number of tragic deaths, killings and violence is reported only with sensational titles as they happen, with no follow-up, investigation or explanation from social workers or psychologist as to why there is an increase in the extreme violation cases, how it can be solved, and how can media help to overcome parts of the situation.

In the period January – May 2016, a number of issues related to social work discourse happened in the country and although the news is devastating and require investigation or some type of explanation from various experts, media focuses only on delivering the “what, where and when” part of the news, hardly addressing “why and what’s next for the victims’ families”.

Main reason for this negligence is the strong focus on political statements and vague blaming, showing a clear political capture and polarization of the Albanian media.

An overview of topics covered in times of poverty, killings, serious drug issues and domestic violence, shows that Albanian media treats the public as a passive consumer, offering vain political news instead of addressing the issues that affect its readers directly. However, as argued in this paper, based on the author's personal involvement with the media, there can be occasions when the clustering of stories also opens the door to social workers to increase media coverage, to shape the media and editorial coverage, as well as to explain the complexities, need for promotion and realities of social work. And these occasions are the ones that should be embraced by social workers to use traditional media as their ally and also review the anti-social side of social media.

Most of the cases studied for this paper have a common element: severe social issues and a big need for social services and social work. Social work is composed of activities influenced by contemporary contexts, including experiences in families, parenting, need for efficient and available support, service stability, public perceptions, etc., all heavily influenced by media coverage and commentary. Some authors have argued that "media coverage may even in part have an impact in changing the discourse for social work" (Parton, 2011).

It is this media context on which this paper focuses. Media reflects an absence of trust and faiths in social work, and sometimes, even hostility towards professionals (O'Neill, 2002; Seldon, 2009).

Social work in many countries seem to be in crossroads, with a lack of public trust in the support offered by the professionals, budget cuts and overlooking the effect of good social work for the society. And in this difficult crossroads media is not being handy. Much of the media coverage on social work is negative. Or negligent. However, whilst reflecting on this coverage, the paper also suggests how the coverage may be reshaped, changing, as a result, some of the contexts for social work.

### **Methods**

This paper brings an overview of social issues covered by online media in Albania in the period January – May 2016, namely: The web portals Balkan Web [www.balkanweb.com](http://www.balkanweb.com) and [www.shqiptarja.com](http://www.shqiptarja.com) The newspaper Panorama Online [www.panorama.com.al](http://www.panorama.com.al) and Shekulli Newspaper [www.shekulli.com.al](http://www.shekulli.com.al).

On the one hand, it is a content analysis of media coverage of social issues in Albania in a specific period. It examines the number, type and reporting attitude to social work related issues, with a content analysis approach, using thematic analysis to understand the intentions that lie behind mass media production of specific media texts (encoding), as well as textual analysis, examining the use of words and phrases within the published text, to better understand the influence they might have on the reader.

On the other hand, it carries out a critical discourse analysis on the need for broader coverage of these issues. The critical discourse analysis looks at the media representation of social issues, focusing on two main elements of media representation of social work:

- Space
- Identity given to social work related issues.

The aim of this research is to encourage both media representatives and social work professionals on the need for optimizing efforts for cooperation in the name of public good, as well as how to change the way of this desired cooperation. Successful cooperation of this kind will deliver the necessary knowledge on appropriate social policies. This cooperation succeeds in extending the real scope for policy-makers, rather than just getting the actors involved to engage in short-sighted activities whose content is fixed in advance. The question of broader media coverage of social issues is not conceived in the media tradition as an individual or group preference of professional satisfaction, but as being part of the fair role that media has to play in serving public good (Livingstone, Lunt, 1994).

### **Analysis**

Media to social work – What makes you worth for news?

During the research period for this paper (January – May 2016), from the content analysis perspective, a number of tragic events requiring attention from psychologists and social workers happened in the country, amongst them: a young girl was raped and almost killed by her cousin; sexual assault on a 20-year old girl from a 56 years old Mayer in Northern Albania was made

a public issue, the notorious reappearance of a former police officers who killed a 16 years old girl and her mother for refusing marriage swept media and readers by storm, a young Albanian male was found beheaded in northern Greece, a cheating husband killed his wife in a furnishing store bathroom to continue undisturbed his adult affair, two youngsters were arrested for drug dealing in Albanian high schools in the capital, much to the surprise and shock of their families, two minor girls reported continuous sexual assault from their father, though they had previously tried to seek help from the psychologist at their school, a teacher at an orphanage was arrested for severe physical violence on toddlers, and social workers of the orphanage were not able to do anything to protect the children, due to fear of losing their job; a husband killed his wife at her home, even though she was under protection order from the court, etc.

In the meantime, in the political spheres, reforms on the judicial system and individual squirrels between politicians were heavily covered on a daily basis, with a frequency of at 3-20 times more than social issues as listed in the cluster above. Social related issues have received significantly lower attention from the media and have hardly dominated the main page of the online outlet unless is a sensational news involving killings and road accidents.

The daily life in Albania according to the media representation of news published from the 4 main online media outlets, appears as in the table below.

**Table 1.**

Online media Monthly uploads	Nr. of articles Published	Political themes	Social related themes	Other
www.balkanweb.com	2 428*	850	225	1053
www.shqiptarja.com	2505 <sup>†</sup>	905 <sup>‡</sup>	213	1387
www.panorama.com.al	1284	490 <sup>§</sup>	225	569
www.shekulli.com.al	2140	1306**	65	169

The content analysis allows the paper to look through the communication that these online media is producing as a way of creating a picture of the Albanian society. For the first part of the analysis, the researcher uses the number of articles in a given timeframe as the unit of media content. For the second part, the findings are clustered in smaller units and coded separately for every media outlet (social work related articles). Using the number of articles as a unit for this part enables the researcher to detect the high interest of the media outlets to publish news related to the politics of the day, compared to news related to social issues, as shown in the table above. What appears interesting is also the low reporting of social issues compared to the cluster “other news”, where the researcher has calculated the number of articles published under units (domains) such as economy and culture. Showbiz and lifestyle news is not included in this research, as it would require another type of analysis. With an intensive growth of news under lifestyle and showbiz, news from social sphere is becoming even less present in the online media.

When comparing the coverage of social issues in the media to political issues, news from current affairs and other on the overall number of published in each media outlet in the research, it is easy to notice the trend in all four: news related to social issues comes last. It has a limited appearance, showing a lack of interest on the cluster and it is not significant to the publishing flow.

\* Under 5 categories: kulture 53, ekonomi 100, kronike 900, politike 850, sociale 225, Kulture 35

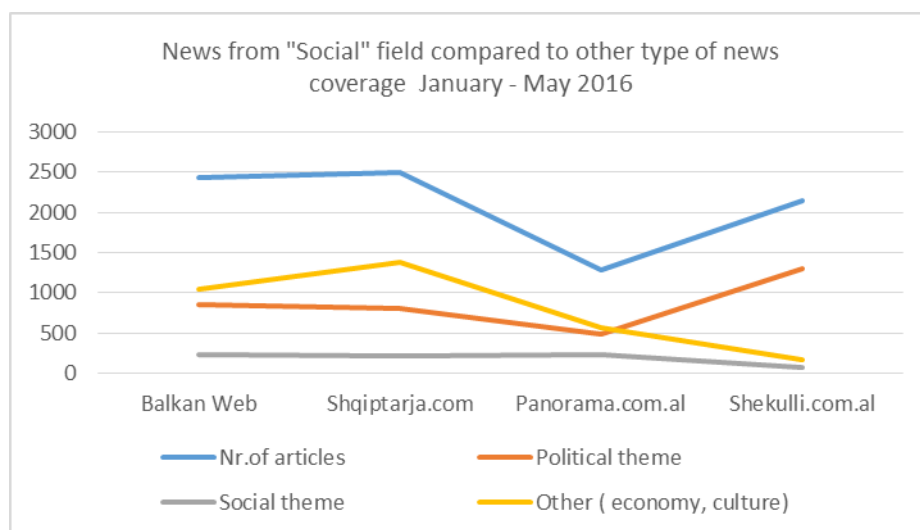
<sup>†</sup> Under 6 categories: Aktualitet 1200, ekonomi 75, politike 900, sociale 150, culture 128, shendet 50

<sup>‡</sup> Under Politikë and Aktualitet tabs

<sup>§</sup> Under categories: Politics 490 (cluster Politke 270, Aktualitet 120, Argument 100); 600 Kronike, Ekonomi 128, Sociale 66

\*\* Under categories: 1306 (cluster Politics 650, Thelle 656), Kronika 665, 38 economics, Jete 66, Kulture 65.

This trend is common in all researched outlets. A silent understanding and unified message: “social issues are not as important as political ones”.



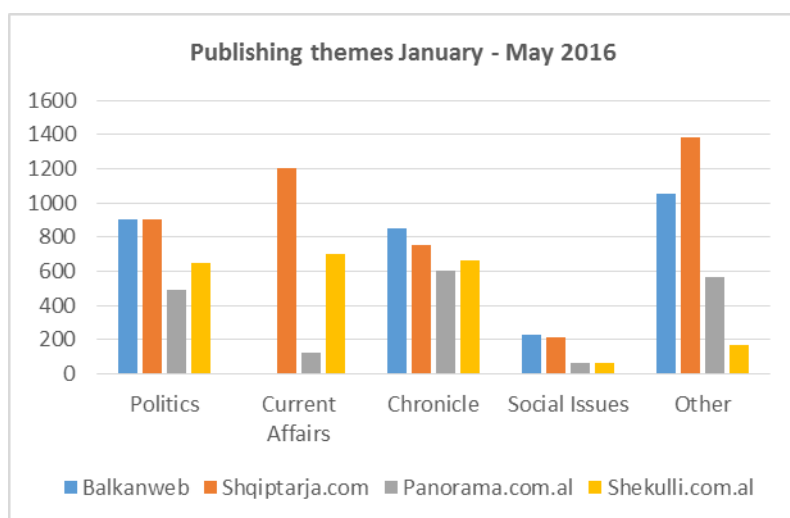
**Fig. 1.** Report and coverage of news on social issues vs other type of news

When looking at the type and reporting attitude on the news within the unit itself, in the cases where the news is classified both under Chronicle and Current Affairs, the news reports about extreme violence on the majority of the cases studied in this research (701/728), and media appears to target the perpetrators, but does not pay any attention to those who work to assist and protect the victim on a continuous basis. The focus remains in the killing, ignoring police, health workers, social workers and all other relevant agencies who get involved in the event (news).

News similar to the cluster above involving social work elements is published with various approaches to reporting and investigation in western media outlets. And whilst in other countries, the problem of the media coverage of social work is that of negative portrayal, in Albania, the problem is that media ignores social work all together. When searching for the use of words and phrases within the given texts, it becomes clear that none of the articles identifies the need to involve social workers' presence in the news and no report is made on approaching social work professionals to help in the representation of cases and next steps. Only psychologists are randomly mentioned and without quotes.

### **What did the media report and how?**

Each online media included in the research uploads an overwhelming number of around 2500 articles a month (main themes only: political, current affairs, chronicles, social, economic and culture. No sports, world news, showbiz and lifestyle). It is easy to notice the low number of articles and space dedicated to news reporting on social affairs. The whole cluster of violence related news, linked to poverty, vulnerability, lack of economic means of survival and difficulties for social integration of the families affected by the social issues news, is heavily underreported by online media. As the discourse analysis will show in the second part of the research, the news of this cluster is not only underreported, but also underrepresented, as the news is limited to giving the facts of the event only, totally ignoring information or investigation from professionals that can help understand the issue and contribute to fewer events that produce tragic news.



**Fig. 2.** Overview of media coverage as per topic of each outlet

### Representing social issues and need for professional presence – a discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis authors Keating and Dannen (2015) argue that spaces are often constructed by different people in different ways. During construction of space, struggles and lack of information are common. And spaces are socially constructed to fit immediate needs. As a result, discourses on inclusion or exclusion are more often than not connected to particular spaces. From this perspective, how is the space constructed in Albanian media for social related issues? The detailed look into the space created and the role that media plays in promoting the need for social work services started as a response to the way in which a high level of ignoring social issues (excluding space) has become a stable feature throughout Albanian media. This feature seems to be impacting on many other countries as well, although in various degrees. The situation appears to be particularly serious when media's help to detect social issues is crucial, and instead of responding to this demand, media chooses to ignore the field altogether (text absence from the analysis perspective). However, according to journalists and editors, there are no clear or malign motivations behind this behaviour (Franklin 1999). The lack of coverage, hence creation of space, is made in favour of "fancier" issues like politics and showbiz, occupying the biggest share in media coverage and ignoring social work as a relationship building profession. In Albania, this trend has reasonably led to a public call for changes in the way media and politics occupy the public space – a call mainly expressed with public opinions by various media analysts, but also with an increasing activism in organising legal protests in front of public institutions, calling for institutional response to the aggravating situation in social issues. A protest in front of the public TV brought media to the timeline of concerns about social problems, issues, policies and needs for social work.

It is not unjustified to talk about a serious negligence and this description applies to all media types: print, electronic, digital, internet, new and traditional. Alongside the struggles to bring social issues to the limelight, what we are dealing with here is fundamental questions of serving public good that even other countries of the region have already started to address in their official policies and statements (Babović, Vuković, Spinger, 2015). However, when we look at the identity given to the social work related issues, the slanted portrayal of social work by all media types continues, just as noted by some authors of this field: "Media will continue to emphasise the human drama and bad news aspects of inquiries, since these contribute to news value" (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2004).

This role that media has chosen to play has both an evidence-based (Aldrige, 1994; Franklin, 1999; Ayre, 2001; Ayre and Calder 2001) and current affirmation: "There is a sustained nature of the negative images of social work that have been commonplace" (Munro, 2011, b, p.122; see also Braun & Robb, 2010).

In the news reports of online media monitored for this research, it is clear that the coverage is focused primarily on politics of the day, with the selected online outlets publishing minute by minute and extensively on current affairs. This hasty coverage of rhetoric in politics occupies the space for other important issues that the public might have been interested in. Similar to the

coverage of electoral campaign, daily news is not informative or relevant for the audience. As one of the reports on audience expectations on news coverage states:

“Audience, when addressed as voters would have benefited from a more analytical and in-depth coverage that could have helped them to better analyze and assess the qualities and programs of electoral contestants... A more comprehensive analysis of contestants’ platforms was generally absent from the news programs of broadcast media” (IDRA, 2013).

What was left out in the media coverage? N. Fairclough argues that absence in the text is a serious feature in the absence of the discourse. And what was left out of the media attention, investigation and deeper reporting, are issues that cannot be ignored easily. Main dramatic event during the research period included:

- Sexual assault on a 20-year-old girl from a 56 years old Mayer in Northern Albania was made a public issue.
- Notorious reappearance of a former police officer who killed a 16 years old girl and her mother for refusing marriage swept media and readers by storm,
- A young Albanian male was found beheaded in northern Greece,
- A cheating husband killed his wife in a furnishing store bathroom to continue undisturbed his adult affair,
- Two minor girls reported continuous sexual assault from their father, though they had previously tried to seek help from the psychologist at their school,
- A teacher at an orphanage was arrested for severe physical violence on toddlers, and social workers of the orphanage were not able to do anything to protect the children, due to fear of losing their job;
- A husband killed his wife at her home, even though she was under protection order from the court.

Number of social workers or other professional’s interviews: 0

Number of social workers approaching the media to influence/encourage editorial lines: 3

Identity given to social work: Authors and researchers of social work are worried about the media coverage, portrayal and identity given to their profession. The portrayal offered by the media is often negative, misleading and sometimes even insulting towards social workers as individuals. In Albania, this goes a few steps backward. Media representation of social work is neither negative nor insulting. It’s just NOT there AT ALL.

Using “social work” and “social worker” as a decoder for the unit of “social issues related news”, it becomes clear that the cluster mentioned above is of no interest for media to link it to social work. Even in cases where a social worker becomes part of the news as a staff member of the orphanage where violence against children was detected, the media did not pick on the importance of investigating with her. Or asking for the opinion from per professional perspective. Simply, ignored. And by ignoring the professionals, media ignores the opportunities to turn social news, social issues into better social policies.

## Results

One major question related to the need for affirmation of social work: What is the role of media in helping social problems become social issues leading to social policies? (strong ones, which would affirm performance and identity of social work)

Media role is clearly the key to widely reach the public in real time, to give a voice to social work by talking about social problems. Media could well facilitate the way towards social work affirmation. But first, it needs to understand and to accept social problems as “prime time” or “headline” issues.

There is a growing list of reasons for media’s choice to leave social issues and the need for social work in shadow. They range from editorial policies, individual preferences of the journalists, affiliations with specific institutions, political interests, business connections and lack of understanding the importance of social issues to inability to meet professionals within the social work pool who would be ready and patient to work with the media on a regular basis intensively.

The space for social work in the media is granted by editorial chiefs and media owners, who, together with the political elite play the dominant role in Agenda Setting (McCombs and Shaw 1968) in the country. However, professionals at the social work end, who should provide the

information and availability, are met by young journalists, who have a hard task in understanding the complexity of social work. Acquisition of knowledge about social work at the faculty of journalism is insufficient (Luarasi 2015). Hence, professional social workers have an extra need to fill in their difficult relations with the media.

This is where the next weak link appears. Social workers and agencies are seen as significantly reluctant to engage with the media and are often encouraged to engage more (Lombard et al. 2009). Ethical and practical dilemmas prevent social workers from being either proactive or reactive with the media, together with the hesitation of welcoming media attention and exposure of their work. This reluctance has its own consequences, leading to social work stories untold, with very weak representation and unchallenged stereotypes for social workers (Fraser, 2004).

However, although descriptions of the problems have encouraged a significant number of argumentative analyses, these have not led yet to any improvements for the professionals concerned. After the repeated pessimistic media coverage of social issues during the electoral campaigns in Albania, one can argue that the situation has deteriorated even further.

Positive examples of social workers and media engagement are limited, hindering thus opportunities for positive experiences that would challenge the simplifying, one-dimensional portrayal of social work task.

Against this background, all the different training initiatives by social work and AMI for the media merge into a lack of prospect for better coverage. This means, fewer chances to reach target group and beneficiaries of social work, but most importantly, fewer chances to influence policy makers, who have shown to be sensitive to respond to media portrayals.

### **Why should media become an ally?**

The extent of clarity in understanding social work defines: 1) space, 2) representation, 3) importance and 4) opportunities given to social work by the media. Hence, it can become a helping hand in its need for affirmation.

Besides the negligence, poor or inaccurate coverage, the clustering of social work related stories has a good potential to open the door to social workers to increase media coverage, to shape the media and editorial coverage, to explain the complexities, need for promotion and realities of social work.

It has been argued that media coverage has undermined the collective confidence of social workers (Elsley, 2010). On the other hand, frequent and accurate media coverage has influenced in escalating referrals and workloads for social workers (Graef, 2010), i.e. with more child protection referrals, plans, care proceedings, etc. (Green, 2012).

In the fast-changing way in which news reaches the public (24-hour news channels and online continuous news streaming), there is even more news space to fill for social work. Despite the big flow of information, media still chooses to news clusters over strings, and this is in favour of news stories coming from social work. What are the advantages that social work can take here? News clusters stick to relevant stories, repeat them and drill down messages which can be generalised. Clusters also allow reshaping in continuing stories (Rqensley, 2010). Journalists look for different angles and perspectives so that viewers are kept tightly connected with the story, without losing its interest. This is where social workers can offer the new angle: their angle. Furthermore, in news clustering, social workers should be able to anticipate what could be the next story, perspective, journalist or media to cover it. The task here is to seek to shape in advance the editorial storyline before it becomes part of the cluster and delivered for public consumption.

### **Suggested steps:**

#### **What can social workers do to get media on their side?**

Social workers shall insist in making media understand and increase coverage of the non-accidental death of women and children, adoption, domestic violence, psychological and social crisis, etc. And here, social workers have to create their one space. Media will not grant it. Hence, social workers might need to rely on the following actions:

1. Proactively, get coverage for good news stories about social work. Reactively, respond to media request for comments even in the negative stories.
2. Influence in shaping stories about to emerge or those in continuous coverage.

### **How to influence the media?**

Apart from the hostile media coverage on social work, it is still possible, in most of the stories, to comment on the practice, to raise dilemmas and to incite public debate.

There is a significant media appetite for reporting, comment and provide information to fill endless pages and minutes of live broadcasting, with some particular Medias or programs seeing to present a balanced picture with the whole complexity.

Media is in a constant run and no journalist has time to sit and listen to detailed explanation of social workers enduring to persuade the journalist how important it is to be a social worker. It's in the best interest of all sides if the social worker finds efficient ways let the journalist know that their work is often distressing and sometimes threatening and that media and political response is itself damaging and dangerous.

#### Helping media to help social work

There are several ways to establish good cooperation with media outlets, especially with the fast reach opportunities offered by the internet.

a) Creating a good and trustworthy cooperation with one media outlet, gives you access to the other, as the news spreads fast, and once you gain recognition as a source, that media will start coming to the source instead. This cooperation can work by initially offering time and commitment to help journalists go through a story from begging to end, producing a thorough report that would make their work stand out. This requires time investment and commitment by both sides, and in the end, would provide a degree of recognition to the professionals who spend their working lives helping and protecting others.

b) Shaping forthcoming stories: It is often possible to anticipate the next media story about social work, especially if it about ongoing stories. These are excellent opportunities for social workers to initiate working with the journalists in advance: offer professional and technical briefing, explain broadly the practice and the policy context, with the view to both inform and shape the story direction, although it might not be cited. But it certainly has a potential for influencing the point of view for each story. The organisational difficulty of social work services and workload pressure might not be self-understood by the media, hence, it is worth it to anticipate the story by adding this type of information to the journalists who will work with emerging stories.

c) Feeding on-going reports: Journalists are rarely happy with the number of facts they can gather for a story. They do look for more information, for new perspectives and alternative sources, especially if they are reporting on stories of women fatal stories or any story involving maltreatment and risk of children. Reading an incomplete or wrongly reported news online is very likely in today's world of publishing online faster than anyone else everything that goes on the publisher's desk. For the media, being fast is as important as being thorough. This is a chance for social work professionals to intervene if they believe the story needs more information. Social media and internet allow everyone to reach everyone in a matter of minutes, and journalists would respond to an e-mail by a professional who is willing to feed his story.

d) Aim for media training: It is not possible for social workers to become news producers or journalists. As it is not possible for journalists to learn everything about social work in a few minutes or months. Training in respective fields would be a great asset for both sides, and mostly, for the readers.

### **Conclusion**

Media coverage about social work in Albania remains poor. Besides the lack of media understanding and interest in social work, professionals of the field have also their share of responsibility in changing this situation. Examples have been given in this paper of working with positively the media to influence and inform their coverage of social work, which would lead to strengthening its identity and ultimately, social work affirmation. Choosing to be proactive with the media, even in cases where it is hostile to story coverage, might actually help reshape the story. Airtime and online media are now hungry for news and new angles or comments in each story. Offering those from a social work perspective, helps professionals find a new and influential ally in the media.

Media representation of social work is very important both in shaping public opinion about social work, and impacting social workers themselves. It is still very important to monitor media portrayal of social work, in order to remain aware of what type of information and understanding is



offered to the public and then, try to challenge these perceptions and portrayals when possible and appropriate.

Media is unfortunately not the helping hand needed by social workers. It plays instead the role of “self and other” (N.G.Hamilton, 2004) with social work, giving it an even harder task in the efforts to reach both, beneficiaries and policy makers widely and fast. Each one of the analysis reveals significant problems with the social work-media relation. These problems also mark the main approaches required to transform media into the helping hand longed for, as examined in various countries.

One mantra where professionals of the field believe is that social workers change the world: one person at a time. Make media learn this by heart and the game takes both social work and the media to a win-win situation, with the audience reached in higher numbers and with wider topics, beyond politics.

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