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Draft Law on Freedom of Information Promoted

A Step Towards Democratization of the Country

Base for Open Society in BiH

A Draft Law on Freedom of Information made by a special working group composed of local and foreign legal experts was promoted in Sarajevo. The law, which officially entered parliamentary procedure on June 28, is a foundation for a more open society in Bosnia-Herzegovina, says the international community. The draft stipulates that any person has the right to access information possessed by the government and other public bodies. It also gives the individual the right to amend or correct their personal information and make comment on it. Practically, state bodies and all public institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, except for a number of specified exceptions, should no longer have secrets. According to the draft law, it is enough to write a request, send it to the relevant state body, and get any information from its scope of work. Financial, political and staffing transparency, when the law is passed, will become public commodities, at least formally. The Law on Freedom of Information also stipulates exceptions from the freedom of providing information. This refers to data whose publication would jeopardize security of the country or entity, damage criminal investigations, etc.

The law will be particularly useful to journalists, who know best how hard it is to get relevant information in Bosnia-Herzegovina without personal acquaintances with individuals in power. In addition to arrogant ministers and their deputies, access to information has also been prevented by their secretaries, and even doorman in state service.

During presentation of the law, when asked by journalists whether the law also refers to the international community, which has a huge administrative apparatus in Bosnia-Herzegovina, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch replied negatively. “Institutions of the international

community in Bosnia-Herzegovina do not fall under domestic laws, but this does not mean that we will not respect the law, in particular because we are the ones who are proposing it," said Petritsch.

Possible Abuse of Exceptions

The main aim of the law, according to the introductory provisions, is to establish that information controlled by a public body is a public commodity, and that any person has the right to access this information and give comment or correct personal information controlled by the public body. The draft law's introductory provisions define that "information is any material conveying facts, opinions, data or any other content," and that a public body is: (a) an executive body (of the government), (b) a legislative body (parliaments), (c) a judicial body (courts), (d) a body which exercises a public function, appointed or established in accordance with the law, (e) any other administrative body, (f) a legal entity owned or controlled by a public body.

The specification of public bodies is very widely set and practically encompasses all bodies of authority. However, the liberal character of publishing information controlled by these bodies is restricted by exceptions defined in three categories: (a) defense and security interests, as well as protection of public security, (b) crime prevention and crime detection, (c) protection of the decision-making process on the part of a public body in giving opinion, counsel or recommendation of an employee of a public body, which does not encompass factual, statistical or technical information.

In view that these exceptions are generally defined, this leaves open the possibility that some information for which the government does not want transparency will remain hidden under the pretext, for example, of "defense and security interests." Or, with point "c", which is unclearly formulated and basically concerns protection of a public body, a sensitive area is opened as to what is opinion, and what fact. This raises the question of who should assess whether, in what way and how much security is jeopardized and whether public bodies' internal acts will specify these cases. Even today politicians in Bosnia-Herzegovina are inclined to accuse journalists, certain political parties, and non-governmental organizations of jeopardizing national security or state interests through their writing or activities. This problem should partly be solved with the establishment of the institution of Ombudsman for Information, which the draft law stipulates. This ombudsman, states the proposed law, should "examine the activities of public bodies pursuant to this law, upon receiving a complaint or *ex officio*." However, it is not regulated how the Ombudsman for Information will act if he or she notices irregularities or evasion of the provisions of this law. In addition, the law's final provisions state that responsibility for the law's implementation lies on the entity Justice Ministry. It is stipulated that within three months of the day the law goes into effect the Ministry should sign a joint agreement with the Government of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the government of the other entity concerning application of responsibility for the implementation of the law.



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A request for access to information is to be submitted to the relevant public body. The text of the law specifies that if a public body establishes its jurisdiction in the content of the request, it shall refer the request to the responsible body and inform the applicant accordingly in written form. The request shall: (a) be in written form in one of the official languages in Bosnia-Herzegovina, (b) contain enough details on the nature and content of information, (c) include the name of the applicant and details on how to contact the applicant.

It is of particular significance that the public body shall not examine nor demand reasons of justification of the request. Therefore, it is not essential, for example, for the journalist to state in the request that he or she needs information for writing this or that article, which will be published on such and such a date, etc.

If access to information is approved, whether partially or in whole, the relevant body shall inform the applicant in writing on the prospect, place and other modalities of access to information. If access to information is refused, the relevant body shall, also in writing, specify the legal ground and other reasons why it cannot give information, but also clearly state the possibilities of filing a complaint with the relevant body, as well as the timeframe for the complaint.

Any public body, following passage of the law, shall name an information officer to deal with received complaints. Practically, when the law goes into effect, all bodies of authority shall have what has so far been called a public relations office.

The relevant public body shall not charge compensation or taxes for filing a request or for written notices under this law. Rates shall only be determined for photocopying. However, the first ten photocopied pages of standard format shall be free of charge.

Bigger Political, Than Practical Significance

There is no doubt that the Draft Law on Information is a significant democratic achievement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Following its passage, certain Balkan stereotypes that the state is a powerful structure that can keep information from its citizens will be destroyed. The Law on Information precisely provides the RIGHT TO KNOW. During the communist system, during the war, and even now, this right has been systematically suffocated. The political impact of the law is immense, in particular because it gives citizens the right to obtain information directly from a public body. However, journalists, at least in this form, will not get too much help from this law. It may even hamper their work if public officials and the administration strictly apply the rule that journalists must submit a written request for any piece of information, and may have to wait for up to 15 days for a reply. For example, journalists have had to wait for information from the police on the number of registered drug-addicts in Sarajevo for three days after submitting a request, although it can be obtained after three clicks of the computer mouse. Can a public body drag out even this kind of information for 15 days?

Independent Media Commission Director Krister Thelin announced a couple of months ago that he would insist on the following postulates that must be incorporated into this law to facilitate journalist work. They are: 1) A request for information should be informal. This is particularly important because many government structures and police bodies ask for official requests from media in order to give out any information. 2) Speedy delivery of information. Namely, journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina wait for several days to get information which is often available the same day. Therefore, Thelin proposes a solution like the one in Sweden, according to which information should be made available the same day. 3) Information is completely free of charge, including costs of photocopying and mailing which needs to be done by the government. 4) Possibility to get information through court, in case it is denied, as well as responsibility before the court of those who refuse to give information.

It is clear from the draft law which has gone into parliamentary procedure that these proposals have been considerably eased. This is probably a result of compromise and accommodating the sluggish state apparatus. Perhaps this also explains the fact that the law has

entered parliamentary procedure a whole year after being initiated by the High Representative with uncertainty as to whether it will be passed at all. (Radenko Udovicic)

Commentary on Television

A Compromised Genre in Journalism

Will Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) journalists be forbidden to broadcast commentaries in the news program? The Croatian parliament will answer this question when it passes the long awaited new Law on Croatian Radio-Television. The government's proposed law includes an article banning the broadcasting of commentaries in the television's news program in order to avoid a "suggestive approach to viewers." As far as we know, this is a unique legislative initiative in the region.

What is the origin of the idea to make a legitimate genre in journalism, whose use should be the sole jurisdiction of journalists and their media organizations, a subject of state regulation? The answer is simple: in post-communist countries, countries in transition and tragic wars, broadcasters, especially television, have become devastating tools of propaganda and not infrequently generators of armed conflict, intolerance and hatred. Spouting of hatred, untruth, deceit, speculation, or even direct calls for pogrom, have become the most significant content of many television stations. In this situation even commentary, with whose name these "media professionals" have unscrupulously adorned themselves, has lost the allure of journalistic polemic and argued analysis and become a means of political manipulation. Over time in certain countries and certain television stations, these "commentators" gradually disappeared from TV screens, but contemporary televisions have not been able to restore commentators' reputation. At the same time, most of these televisions have not been able to replace the archaic quality of television presentation of commentary (a commentator who reads or at most speaks in an empty studio) with a more attractive TV presentation of this genre.

According to the Lexicon of Journalism (Savremena praksa, Belgrade 1979), "commentary is a publicly expressed or written opinion (stand, judgment) on the internal structure, history, development and consequences of an event." Commentary is an extremely engaged, clear and open journalistic form, much more than other genres of journalism. The position of this engagement depends on the political and other orientation of the journalist and his or her media organization. Henceforth, there can be no neutral stance in commentary. Some journalists identify analysis with commentary. Analysis is a journalistic operation (collecting information – analysis – synthesis), while commentary, which may also use analysis as an operation, must always have its own judgment, stand. Due to this, a commentator's autonomous position is vulnerable to potential pressure and manipulation from outside of the journalistic profession.

This small reminder of one of the possible definitions of journalistic commentary seems to point to two opposed professional principles: 1) the journalist must write in a balanced manner, and his or her media organization must be impartial, and 2) the journalist has the right to his or her opinion, i.e. commentary. Journalism practice has come up with the solution – commentary must be separated from information – which has been accepted as a general professional standard in most codes of journalism.

The conceptual tangle concerning journalistic genres and their use appeared as a consequence of abuse of broadcasters on the part of politics. In socialist times, television was considered the most lethal information tool for influencing the masses. In wars and conflicts, it was a propaganda tool for the regime and a medium of cheap entertainment. Such reduced understanding has banished from its program many contents important for the lives of people, it has selected journalistic genres, and suspended world trends in shaping a modern and user-friendly medium. Finally, the door was opened to outside influence, from the government and

political party, to reduce television, its potentials and power, including commentary as the most complex and most responsible authorial act of the journalist, to a worn-out propaganda message.

Here is a short overview of the treatment of commentary as a journalistic genre on public and state televisions in several countries of southeast Europe.

Yugoslavia (Serbia): Glorifying the Regime

Commentary is a very frequent journalistic form on Television Serbia. It is used mostly in the primetime news program *Dnevnik* at 19.30 hrs., which is one of the most popular programs on this television. Every night the program features at least one commentary. The overwhelming approach is negativistic, often even “spitting” because commentaries are usually aimed against the opposition, independent civil organizations, and the international community. Commentaries abound in qualifications such as “foreign mercenaries,” “degenerates of one’s peoples”, “NATO servants”... More rarely, commentators have a positive approach to the issue they present. In such cases, they glorify successes of the regime, usually a result of “political consistency”, or successes in reconstruction of the country.

It is interesting that more than half of all commentaries in the primetime *Dnevnik* are commentaries taken from pro-regime papers – “Politika”, the “red” “Borba”, “Vecernje novosti”... These articles (usually taken from next day’s editions) are read word for word, and they are accompanied with pictures of people the commentary refers to.

There is no legal act regulating the use of commentary in public media.(Vladan Radosavljevic)

Yugoslavia (Montenegro): Without Commentary, But With Recognizable Selection

Commentary, at least in its classical form, does not exist in TV Montenegro’s news program. This is noticeable every day and this fact, as a quality in its program policy, is emphasized by the television’s editorial team. There are no legal or other guidelines regulating this field. The editors quote the well known journalism principles that all important issues should be interpreted and that stands should be presented from several sources and from different positions, thereby allowing viewers to reach their own judgment. It is according to this principle that they worked during NATO strikes, in a situation of war.

However, as it often happens with established criteria, the editors’ political orientation and stand can still be made out. This can be done primarily through selection of the information and arguments presented, figures whose statements are broadcast or not broadcast. This approach is characteristic of many state televisions, which TV Montenegro still is by its status.

TV Montenegro has some sort of a special political news program following the regular primetime one. In this supplement all political parties represented in the parliament can announce their views without any restriction. In particular opposition parties do this, in a very strong form, very critical even towards the authorities which influence the television and its news program. (Pero Radovic)

Croatia: Less Commentary Than Before

Commentary in Croatian Television (HRT) news programs is much less frequent after the change of authorities in Croatia. Unlike the “former” times when commentaries were presented without stating the authors’ names, or when individuals from the authorities gave statements which had the role of commentary, today this journalistic form is used much more professionally. The sources and names of authors are stated, and commentary is separated from news. However, the HDZ has repeatedly objected, and so has the Croatian Social-Liberal Party, that the new ruling “six” have considerable influence on the editing of news programs, and that therefore commentaries have been in their favor.

The state parliament is presently deliberating a Law on Croatian Radio-Television. Two proposals are in circulation – one made by the Croatian Government, and the other by Jadranka Kosor of the formerly ruling HDZ party, who is still a member of the HRT Council. The government proposal stipulates a ban on using commentary as a journalistic form in news programs in order to avoid a “suggestive approach to viewers.” The HDZ maintains that this proposal restricts the rights of media and journalists. (Gordana Vilovic)

Macedonia: Commentary Separated From News

Macedonia does not have any legislation regulating the use of commentary in public media. However, the Radio-Diffusion Council, which has a regulatory role in the work of electronic media, on the eve of the last elections issued guidelines on media conduct in the pre-election period, according to which media must clearly separate commentary from news, and strive for using commentary in the news program as little as possible. Most broadcasters adhered to the guidelines in that they clearly separated commentary from news, but still, this journalistic form remained present in the news program.

In Macedonian Television’s news programs, commentary is a form with a presence. It is usually clearly separated from news, authors of commentaries are clearly stated, and content of commentary is exclusively political. Independent journalists and chroniclers maintain that commentaries are usually written in favor of the ruling party in Macedonia. (Vesna Sopar)

Albania: Visible Political Orientation

All radio and TV stations in this country currently have temporary broadcasting licenses and the process of issuing permanent licenses will be completed in September. As things stand now, Albania will have two national television stations, while all other TV stations will have local status. Many criteria had to be fulfilled in applying for a license. The most important was for news program to be in public interest. All TV stations are requested to edit news program in an independent and politically impartial manner. However, in reality, the road to such understanding of the information business is still long. “TeleArberia” and “TeleNorba Shqiptare” have come closest to the idea of impartiality. On the other hand, Albanian public TV, which is usually called state TV, is still generally the government’s mouthpiece. Sometimes journalists even present their stands incorporated into news items, which makes detection of TV stations’ partiality easier. Such things happen most often on state TV, but some private stations also prefer the government, and in their news programs, for example, the first five news items talk about protocol meetings of government officials. Although many TV stations feign impartiality, the Albanian public can easily determine their political orientation.

Still, commentaries, as a pure journalistic form, are rarely used in TV programs. Only “Shijak TV” has a news supplement called “Editorial.” This is a two-minute presentation of the editorial team’s impressions of some important event. Sometimes state television in the primetime news program at 8 p.m. invites an experienced journalist as a guest to give his or her opinion of a

certain event. This is done mostly with foreign news and with exceptionally important events in the country, but not with everyday political events. (Diana Kalaja)

Bosnia-Herzegovina: Anchor Tightrope Act

The time when inflammatory language was the dominant content of many TV programs has passed, and journalists who spearheaded this kind of TV presentation have disappeared from TV screens. RTV BiH and RTV Republika Srpska news programs no longer feature classical TV commentaries. In a bid to avoid “slippery ground” with so-called controversial issues, which is particularly noticeable with RTV Republika Srpska, news programs have become a purely informative news review. Selection of information, however, sometimes suggests preference for a certain political option or source of information, but there is no direct pressure on viewers’ consciousness. Some RTV BiH editors/anchors still continue to give mini commentaries on events or contents in their announcements, sometimes in their very distinctive style, and such interpretations often have a didactical character or hide commentary in a language tightrope act. It is interesting that such anchors identify themselves with some unidentified stand, conviction, or belief of the general public, often using constructions such as “we...”, “ours...”, etc. This is a legacy of the former system in which television spoke “in the name of society.”

To a great degree journalists adhere to the rule (whose application is strictly controlled and disrespect sanctioned by the Independent Media Commission) that commentary must be separated from information. Inconsistencies appear in other parts of program, which are less controlled, but that is not our topic now.

Banishment From Program or New Spirit and Style

Every a cursory glance at the position and use of commentary as a journalistic genre in television news programs points to several conclusions.

- As a journalistic genre with a high level of writer’s authority and with the psychological and communication advantages given to it by television, commentary on television has been the most convenient form of manipulating journalists, media and the public. Its use has been compromised and it is therefore understandable that ideas have been launched to banish it from public RTV programming.
- In view that commentary on television has mostly been used for political propaganda messages, it has failed to be shaped to suit television. Reading or speaking in the studio with an empty background is considered an old-fashioned form of expression.
- Commentary has mostly moved into anchors’ announcements, field reports and weekly news and documentary programs. The principle of separating commentary from information has been established with more or less success.
- Generally looking, there is too much confusion in defining and applying individual journalistic genres on television. Some of them are a copy of press, or in a better case, of radio. Investigative procedures are undefined, and modern TV genres still in their bud.
- The often shallow, but also often destructive commentary should obviously disappear from television, but as one of the most complex and most honorable journalistic forms, commentary must find its new spirit and style on television.

Media News invites you to present your position on this issue.

(Zoran Udovicic in collaboration with Media Pool – Communication for Professional Journalism associates)

New views - from a distance

If I were to find myself again in a war, I would probably act different – this conclusion, but with different arguments, could be drawn from most of the ideas heard during a meeting of war reporters in Neum on June 23-24 this year. For some of them war reporting was a professional challenge, for others a patriotic obligation. Some found themselves on the “line” almost by accident and thus became war reporters, others were sent by their media organizations as on any other assignment. Among them are also those who expected war recognition, because they thought they were soldiers in the first place, and only then journalists. Be it as it may, a year, five or even ten years after their “war baptism”, these journalists today with a lot of caution and without euphoria speak about their war reporting. Songs of praise in memory of days of war spent on the Croatian battlefields back in 1992, on the fronts of Bosnia-Herzegovina on both sides of the confrontation line, or in Kosovo, increasingly give place to demystification of the war and one’s own journalistic role.

An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Bosnia-Herzegovina decided to bring together war reporters who reported on the war in Bosnia within a project called People about War. In accordance with the mandate of this international organization, the topic was the Geneva Conventions – whether journalists knew about them, whether they wrote about their respect or disrespect, how they were protected in their professional work. Although a topic defined in such a way considerably narrowed down the contents of potential discussion, the meeting in Neum, within Media Plan’s Summer School, was characteristic in many regards. First, for the first time since the war it gathered in one place reporters who had worked on different sides in the conflict. Second, the badly needed distance started to appear, from which it is possible to assess the real professional effects and failures of war reporting. In the gathering, which is normal, there were no journalist spearheads who spouted hatred during the war, but it is a pity that some excellent reporters also did not come, who seem to be reserved at the possibility of talking about professional matters with disregard for their national, entity or ideological orientation.

Media News offered an OBN journalist, Adis Saranovic, Media Plan School of Journalism graduate, to present his view of war reporting based on his experiences from the war and today’s views of his colleagues.

The Journalist – An Attractive Target

To work as a war reporter means to be familiar with customs of war and one’s professional rights. The Geneva Conventions should be inevitable guidelines, particularly when it comes to “ethics” of war, protection of civilians, and even one’s own rights if you find yourself as a journalist in a war-torn area.

Few journalists will say they did not know about the Geneva Conventions. However, during the war it became clear that they did not know, but also could not use the protection that any civilian should enjoy, especially a war reporter. For, a journalist, until he or she puts on a uniform, is first of all a – civilian. Practice during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina proved all the inconsistencies and impossibilities of applying the Geneva Conventions to local reporters. Journalists worked in different circumstances. Every city in the country found itself in different military or political surroundings, which had an impact on the work of journalists.

Local journalists assert that for a long time there was no organized state control over information, so-called war censorship, but journalists were aware of what and how they could write, or report. There was a pronounced feeling of self-censorship and a patriotic, political, national or even ideological feeling of belonging to one option or side. This is why local journalists in the Bosnian war could not be a neutral side. Military and political leaderships treated them as part of their war strategy. Journalists on the other side were treated as the enemy, and

towards “one’s own” they were distrustful because they were able to see, hear and publicize more than necessary. The distrust of military authorities and local commanders towards war reporters especially hampered their work. Journalists were labeled by the warring factions as a particularly “dangerous element” and therefore bore the brunt more than others. It was senseless to cherish the idea that something could be written from the other side. Several journalists who wandered to the “other side” immediately found themselves in camps and the Red Cross and international journalist organizations managed to get them out only with great difficulty. To target a reporter was an especially interesting task, and to arrest one, an especially successful action. Journalists knew this but, as some of them say, in special situations they never quoted their rights from the Geneva Conventions, because they probably considered them a dead letter on paper. Borka Rudic, RTV BiH war reporter from Konjic, says it would have been ridiculous to say to a local commander: “Listen, under Article 50, paragraph 1, I am a civilian and must be treated accordingly.” They could have easily really been treated as “special.” Journalists were expected to be patriotically committed, because in a local war they are in a special position, they are actually part of “one side to the conflict.” The most they could do to protect themselves, their families and to behave professionally at work, was to report fairly and accurately.

Another attenuating circumstance, which hampered journalists in war in their professional work, was the inaccessibility of information from both sides. It was impossible for journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina to go to the other side to collect information. They could move, conditionally speaking, only on their own territory. Their reports were also like that, they relied on “their army and police” and carried out their work with their help.

Most journalists today assert that they carried out their tasks “honestly” and “professionally.” However, many of them have completely compromised their profession. The results of their writing, to a large degree, have been devastating for the profession. They were not journalists, but warmongers and generators of hatred. How, in circumstances in which international rules on warfare were not being applied, where war was actually waged against civilians, could one maintain a professional attitude towards what one is writing about? To call the warring factions and their armies by the names that they call themselves, was one of the fair moves, says Milos Solaja, war correspondent for “Tanjug” from Banja Luka. “I did not use derogatory and insulting names for the enemy in agency reports and thus I preserved my professionalism,” says Solaja.

The Uniform as Protection

Although they did not say it out loud, the impression given by the Neum gathering is that many journalists heard only on this occasion what the Geneva Conventions contain and what rights and obligations they had during the war as reporters from war-torn areas.

Legal expert Edina Residovic informed the journalists about the Geneva Conventions, in particular about the part specifying the status of civilian population during war. The journalist is first of all a civilian, who must not be subjected to any harassment or pressure, and who must be treated with dignity on humane principles. However, as they moved across dangerous fronts, many reporters had put on uniforms. They justified this with general security, because they blended in with the environment. Civilian clothes would have made them recognizable and conspicuous. “As a civilian who comes to the front, I would have been in danger from even my own army,” says Milos Solaja about his war experience, explaining it with provocation of anger and jealousy among tired soldiers on the frontlines. A Croatian veteran journalist and war reporter at the beginning of the war in Croatia, Joza Vlahovic, told the gathering that Croatian military authorities would not let him go to the frontlines without a uniform, explaining that a “civilian may be targeted by both their side and our side.” There were also some journalists, although they now do not want to admit it, said some participants in the Neum meeting, who put on uniforms to prove their patriotism and belonging to one military side. However, by putting on a uniform a journalist *de facto* puts himself or herself on one side, thus losing civilian status in war, according

to ICRC representatives, who spoke about their role in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and cooperation with journalists.

Still, when the results of reporting are summed up and small anecdotes from the war are told, a feeling of bitterness remains among all of us. It is hard to say if it is caused by a collapse of ideals, in which some colleagues had firmly believed and written in their name, or by disappointment with post-war status and lack of recognition for their participation in the “fight.” However, few would consciously again enter the adventure called “war reporting.” “If everything were to happen again, instead of the frontline, I would now be in New Zealand,” says a female colleague war reporter.

The general conclusion of the meeting of war reporters in Neum, although they have now found out how they should have behaved and protected themselves in a war zone, is that this knowledge would have done anyone little good in a war like the one in Bosnia. Generally looking, to be a reporter on local frontlines differs a lot from being a foreign reporter. For, in the latter case, you go abroad, you do a neutral and impartial job for both sides, and you soon return home, without fear that someone will label you “traitor” or “unsuitable,” which in Bosnia-Herzegovina conditions sometimes had the role of a call for lynch. War has direct impact on a local journalist. The basic ethical postulates can be preserved, but all professional journalistic rules on naked neutrality or using sources from all sides, are hardly feasible in such conditions.

The golden rule of the trade is that the journalist will uncover information and announce it. War leaders know this, and so do army generals and common war profiteers. That is why all of them maintain that journalists should be treated in a special way. Only the approach is different. A philosophy particularly applied during wartime is that if you do not have journalists on your side, you should not have them at all.

Quoting the Geneva Conventions in times of shelling, sniping or even a plight of your own family may perhaps sound inappropriate. But to note arrogant behavior, bad treatment of civilians, or even crimes committed by people from “your own army,” despite everything, is the reporter’s professional duty. Some have failed this test, but for others this is exactly where they have shown their courage as journalists. (Adis Saranovic)

Moral, Political and Financial Problems of “Slobodna Dalmacija”

Will “Slobodna Dalmacija” Apologize for Inflammatory Language”?

The case of Split’s “Slobodna Dalmacija” surpasses by far the characteristics of a local media scandal. In it we can identify the tragedy of the media situation in many countries in transition: interference on the part of the state, corruption, media abuse for political aims, dependence of journalists on employers, loss of professional identity. Goran Vezic of STINA News Agency from Split writes about “Slobodna Dalmacija.”

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In Croatian journalism, along with correction, the institute of collective journalist apology is being established. A branch of the Croatian Journalist Association (HND) and the journalist syndicate of “Slobodna Dalmacija” has publicly apologized to Croatian People’s Party leader Vesna Pusic and “Nacional” journalist Jasna Babic for their discrediting on the pages of this paper.

The apology to Vesna Pusic refers to articles published recently by “Slobodna Dalmacija” on Dr. Grga Budislav Andjelinovic and his role in the slaughter of Croatian protesters in Zagreb

following the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (KSHS), in which the political activities of Andjelinovic, who is incorrectly claimed to be Vesna Pusic's grandfather, are connected to her. They have apologized to Jasna Babic for a headline "Jasna Babic – UDBA spokesperson" (UDBA – secret police of the former Yugoslavia). The apology was also sent to everyone who has been daily defamed on the pages of "Slobodna Dalmacija," as well as the general public insulted by such editorial policy.

"Slobodna Dalmacija" itself failed to carry the text of the apology. Signatory to the apology Davorka Blazevic, president of the "Slobodna Dalmacija" journalist syndicate president, comments on this:

"A possible reason for not publishing the apology, in my opinion, is primarily because the editor-in-chief, Josip Jovic, maintains that it is not fair of his syndicate and HND branch to issue an apology which certainly undercuts him. However, if we speak of undercutting the editor-in-chief, then this was done first of all during the secret vote of journalists and photographers employed by 'Slobodna Dalmacija' who requested his resignation, which he turned a deaf ear to, so why would he not turn a deaf ear to this statement?"

Recently three-fourths of "Slobodna Dalmacija" journalists requested in writing the resignation of Josip Jovic, the editor-in-chief, which he refused to give. One of the reasons for requesting Jovic's resignation was an article alleging that Stipe Mesic, president of Croatia, is an UDBA associate. The article was published on election blackout day in the presidential campaign in Croatia when Mesic was not able to reply to it.

Davorka Blazevic explains that the articles due to which Vesna Pusic and Jasna Babic deserve an apology are only a cause, but that the motives for public apology are much deeper.

"We wanted to tell the public that what is daily published in 'Slobodna Dalmacija' is actually something that conflicts with the convictions of the majority of the paper's full-time journalists, and that we do not want to stand by such editorial policy at any price, and that we think that 'Slobodna' at this moment should apologize not only to Vesna Pusic or our colleague Jasna Babic, but we think that we should apologize to the general public which we have insulted by such editorial policy, and we think that it is time to definitely put an end to such editorial policy which is actually highly anarchic. In our paper today you can read a highly radical right-wing article, not because we want to be a free, open paper, but due to a lack of even elementary concept in editing the paper. Our editor-in-chief by allowing articles supporting some right-wing rigid forces probably thinks that by doing so he is proving that we are a democratic, free, independent and open newspaper in which there is no censorship. However, I think this is an illusion and deception, which only adolescents can still believe in. We wrote the apology because we wanted the public not to identify us with this final product which we do not want to stand behind. At this moment we have no choice – we live off 'Slobodna Dalmacija' – and we are not spitting into that bowl. We only want to distance ourselves from what this bowl currently has to offer the public. We simply do not want to accept that this is the editorial concept around which this newspaper will build its future."

"Slobodna Dalmacija," which was a respectable newspaper at European level until 1993, was destroyed that year when ownership transformation stole it from journalists and put it in the hands of one of HDZ's founders, Miroslav Kutle, who is now waiting in prison for the outcome of indictments for fraud and illegal appropriation of property that he is accused of. Since 1993 "Slobodna" has been transformed into a voice of hatred which was particularly raised during the Croat-Bosniak war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Do journalists intend to apologize for that as well, furthermore because the paper is run by the same people as seven years ago?

"Of course we should do that. However, I am a syndicate official today and I want to react to any situation happening right now and, personally, I would also have reacted to any such situation at that time. Of course, I tried to do it solely as a journalist at that time. I did what I thought was right at that time. Today I do not know how much it is our task as a syndicate to demand that 'Slobodna Dalmacija' editors apologize for those years. I do not know how much this

team that is running ‘Slobodna’ today and which perseveres in inflammatory language would be willing to apologize for inflammatory language during the war, for which many are today ready to find a million and one arguments to justify it. I do not believe this would be a fruitful appeal,” says Davorka Blazevic.

About “Slobodna Dalmacija” itself, the paper’s syndicate leader says it has been devastated in every regard over the past years, in the professional regard, and most of all in the staffing regard.

“What would it mean to us today if ‘Slobodna Dalmacija’ were to free itself of all debts if we continued to work with the same team. I think it would be equally devastating. We would then probably resemble the obscure weekly ‘Imperijal,’ which is free of the doubts that we are facing because someone else is covering their expenses and has a certain calculation for it. Probably someone would be ready to consolidate us for the same calculation tomorrow. However, I deeply believe that the majority of the people working at ‘Slobodna’ today would not agree to something like that at any price. I think that it is clear to all intelligent people that what I would call a minor minority is the one that is deciding the fate of this house today, and unfortunately we do not have the mechanisms to impose the voice of the majority as something that should be decisive in determining the fate of this house. Due to this, I do not wish to reiterate our disappointment with the conduct of the government, from which we had expected a lot. Primarily because we maintained that we are in the present position thanks first of all to the policy that was in power until yesterday. If the new government has inherited the premises of the old government, its entire logistics, that it has also inherited its debts, and among others also problems such as ‘Slobodna,’ and it has no right to turn a deaf ear to them, and has no right to say ‘Slobodna’ is not our problem. That is not true. We maintain that this is primarily a problem of this government, because it is solely the political balance of forces that has brought ‘Slobodna Dalmacija’ into the situation it is now in, of course with the help of internal logistics,” says Davorka Blazevic, president of the paper’s journalist syndicate.

News

“Vizija,” Southeast Europe Culture Magazine

A magazine called “Vizija” was launched in Sarajevo early July with a sub-title “magazine for culture and critique of time.” The impression given by the first issue is that this is a regional magazine featuring proven writers from the former Yugoslavia, such as Tatjana Tagirov, Gordana Susa, Petar Lukovic...

The magazine’s editors are from Bosnia-Herzegovina – Nenad Velickovic, Tanja Topic, and Faruk Loncarevic. “Vizija” is financed from a Stability Pact culture project and will strive to professionally present and examine cultural and social phenomena in southeast Europe.

“Valter” Again

The paper “Valter” was promoted in Sarajevo June 28. The paper’s concept, and partly staffing, is supposed to be a successor to a paper of the same name from 1988, which was banned by the communist authorities after one year.

“Valter” will be issued fortnightly during the summer period, and in late August or early September it will start to come out once a week. The first issue abounds in articles written by proven names from Bosnia-Herzegovina and its neighborhood, which are considerably critical.

The paper’s editor-in-chief is Enver Causevic, and his deputy is Senad Mesetovic.

State Media Privatization in RS

The Republika Srpska Privatization Office announced that RS Radio Television has been put on a list of strategic enterprises and that a special privatization program will be worked out for this house.

“Privatization of strategic state media will be carried out under a special privatization program, the same as other strategic enterprises in the Republika Srpska,” Radovan Rodic, deputy director of the office, told Bosnia-Herzegovina PRESS.

He added that creation of a special privatization program for this entity’s paper “Oslobodjenje” is in its final phase, and that this will be the first media organization up for sale through auction or some other way.

Rodic said there is a problem regarding privatization of local media, because “they were not established as special legal entities and they are now being separated and their status changed.”

Correction

On IMC Transformation

In the latest issue of “Media News,” we published an article titled “Domestic Staff Takes Over a Large Part of Senior Positions.” The article included certain imprecisions due to which we wish to apologize to the Independent Media Commission. The published article states that IMC was founded on August 1, 1998. However, this is the date when IMC became operative, while its founding date is June 11, 1998. In addition, in the article certain decisions from the High Representative’s founding decision (which established IMC) were credited to the 1998 Madrid Declaration conclusions. We publish an IMC response which precisely states facts of importance for IMC’s management of the frequency spectrum.

“In the Decision of the High Representative on the founding of IMC of June 11, 1998, it is stated among other things that IMC will manage and allocate frequencies until the establishment of a law on telecommunications of Bosnia-Herzegovina, that is until a new evaluation of the High Representative related to all issues of the spectrum. In the final document of the Madrid Declaration from December 1998, IMC is instructed to announce by the end of 1999 a tentative date by which international supervisors will withdraw. The IMC Council during 1999 discussed a possible transition on several occasions and concluded at that time that it will be based on the fulfillment of certain aims. In March of 2000 discussion continued with anticipation of the possibility of merging the functions of IMC and a regulatory telecommunication agency into a single regulatory body for telecommunications and radio diffusion in Bosnia-Herzegovina, with international members who would assume the role of advisors. The latest declaration of the Implementation Council from Bonn envisions further development of IMC under international supervision.”

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Council of Media Plan Institute: Prof. Dr. Muhamed Nuhic, Hamza Bakšić (Sarajevo); Perica Vučinić (Banja Luka); M.S. Lenart Šetinc (Ljubljana); Prof. Dr. Mario Plenković (Zagreb); M.S. Loius de la Ronciere (Paris); M.S. Aleksandar Todorović (Montreaux); Prof. Dr. Slavo Kukić (Mostar), Prof.Dr. Miroљjub Radojković (Beograd)