



Viktor Ivancic

The end of the road

The fate of the controversial and outspoken Croatian weekly *Feral Tribune* is an object lesson in what happens to a publication that refuses to toe the government line or bow to the tyranny of the market. In his editorial for the final issue of the paper, Viktor Ivancic describes how a lifeline was thrown out only to be inexplicably withdrawn.



After appearing regularly every week for more than fifteen years, the issue of *Feral Tribune* that you have before you [18 June 2008] is the last. Over the past year the paper's circulation has been stable and editorial and production costs have been reduced to a minimum. Despite this, accumulated financial difficulties built up over a lengthy period, and the abrupt, unilateral suspension of negotiations with our potential business partner *Europapress Holding* (EPH),¹ which we believed were virtually complete, mean that we are no longer in a position to publish the weekly. The journalists and editors of *Feral Tribune* are confronting obstacles that, at this

moment, appear insurmountable.

The naive or the malicious will surely dismiss us as a market failure — what else apart from the market could be crucial for survival in Croatia? Before they do, however, let me take this opportunity to draw attention, for the 'nth time, to the nature of that "market" and the kind of "success" permitted in it. An opportunity, too, to examine the configuration of the media scene in Croatia that has resulted from the logic of the market and in which, quite understandably it would seem, there is no place for *Feral Tribune*.

Changing media — Media in change

Media-technological developments are causing a fundamental re-structuring of the newspaper and book publishing sectors, with traditional media locked in fierce competition with online newcomers for market superiority. Yet media change is about more than the "newspaper crisis" and the iPad: property law, privacy, free speech and the fundamental functioning of the public sphere are all affected. A new [Eurozine focal point](#) debates a field experiencing profound and constant change.

From its inception, this paper, which has maintained a respectable circulation despite being 20 per cent more expensive than its competitors, has never contained any advertising. This is because the marketing industry, in keeping with the habits that apply to the market, judged it could neither discipline nor

control it. It is well known that no other media outlet in this country has been surrounded by such an impenetrable *cordon sanitaire* by advertisers. It is equally well known that in "regular" commercial situations, newspapers derive over half their income from advertising; a weekly newspaper that lives exclusively from copies sold is by definition doomed to collapse, regardless of the size of its readership.

It is not, therefore, a matter of being relegated to the margin, which would be a relatively comfortable position — in Croatia, the margin is tolerated only if it gives no sign of life — but of condemnation to non-existence. However, we are no longer so naive as to have any illusions about the market: sectarian marketing policy is simply an instrument of the prevailing political and economic oligarchy, a tool whereby the tyranny of the free market has replaced the political terror of former times.

We have tried on numerous occasions to sensitize the public, and particularly professional organizations, to this problem, but to no avail. The Croatian Journalists' Association confined itself to generalized phrases about the fact that "advertisers are exerting increasing influence on editorial policy", but took care not to destroy business conformism through some incautious initiative. Its membership literally trembles with fear in the face of the owners of media corporations, since their continuing employment depends on them.

"Editorial autonomy" is no longer even a distant concept; concern for a point of view that takes the journalist's craft and creativity as its guiding principle is a thing of the past. Journalism is simply a by-product of the interests of media owners and their partners and sponsors who, without the slightest resistance from journalists, intervene on a daily basis. Two years ago, in these pages, we posed some questions we thought fundamental:

- Is journalism becoming merely packaging for advertising?
- To what extent has the marketing industry taken control of the priorities and development of the journalistic profession?
- What is the likelihood that, after many decades of serving various political ideologies, journalism will once again — this time "painlessly" — merge into propaganda, now on an apparently non-ideological basis?
- How far is this "non-ideological" status actually devoid of political influence?

Since then, the question marks have straightened into exclamation marks: things changed and the owners of the media also became the owners of advertising agencies; the biggest advertisers became the owners of press distribution networks; interests merged until death shall them part. And interminable hymns of praise are sung to the representatives of the ruling political elite — who have made all this possible — in the pages of newspapers and on radio and television channels. Elections are won by the assurance of the support of the leading media concerns in return for reciprocal favours. Everything is subordinate to "the market".

This is the context in which the Croatian paradox is realized: increasingly aggressive media expansion is leading to a progressive contraction of the public sphere. Despite the increasing media outlets at its disposal, Croatia is becoming less free. The media, in its abundant homogeneity, no longer provokes dialogue but is dedicated to the perpetuation of exclusively "desirable" kinds of information and opinion. As a result, only "desirable" media intellectuals appear in the pages of magazines and on television

programmes.

The fundamental purpose of insisting on "abundance" is to distract attention from what has been eliminated. For a long time now, Croatian newspapers have not been the generators of critical thought but a testing ground on which it can be tamed. Censorship is no longer interventionist but systemic. The extremely rare independent media outlets and individual Internet portals have become places of salvation where unauthorized information and attitudes can be published: they have become the new "samizdat" for the expression of unauthorized — undesirable — views and opinions. In the past few months, *Feral Tribune* published five stories that were, quite literally, banned by the editorial boards of the leading local dailies and passed to us illegally by their frustrated authors. They concerned high-ranking members of the political, economic and legal nomenclature. Like in the 1990s — but this time in the absence of war, Franjo Tudjman or virulent nationalistic overtones — *Feral Tribune* has been able to base its entire editorial policy on censored articles from the increasingly rich media scene. Except that the market, logically enough, could not accept it.

The dictatorship of the "free market" has been established in such a way that it appears neither free nor a market in the elementary sense of fair play and traditional liberal standards. A market that is tailored and designed to accommodate the interests of the political and economic establishment is a paradigm of mass brainwashing, a form of ideological poisoning with something that is "not ideology", but rather "the production of content", as the creators of corporate manifestos like to put it. It is all the more virulent for its formal espousal of the laws of free competition and equal opportunities for all.

And of course, when the marketing industry, with political backing, throws you out of the frame with a single stroke of a commissar's pen, it will triumphantly proclaim you a commercial failure. The "market" is implacable, dedicated to generating successes for chosen monopoly holders and their serried ranks of yes-men; any analysis of its impact amounts to barefaced cynicism.

It is, perhaps, worth mentioning here that we live in a country where success as an indicator of social arrival is measured by strange parameters. Here, someone accused of wartime atrocities will be elected to parliament; the most popular fascist entertainer, under the aegis of the political authorities, holds a black mass on the central square in Zagreb, in front of tens of thousands of people, on a stage decorated with the enormous advertising banners of its numerous sponsors. The high priests of marketing have no prejudice against those who spread hatred, only against the "radicalism" of those who oppose it.

Nowadays, the firmly bonded triad of political, economic and media power, co-exists alongside the more familiar benefits of transition and functions as a kind of criminal organization — if you will permit us to use this grim phrase we promise it will be the last time — and in Croatia, which is small enough to have been polluted in a strikingly short space of time, the leading-lights of that triad may be individually pinpointed with great accuracy.

The existing media architecture resembles nothing so much as the building sector (it is not surprising that these jobs increasingly go hand-in-hand). "Dwellings" are of increasingly poor quality and ever more garishly painted; there is no let-up in concreting over everything; the environment has been irredeemably devastated but profits are guaranteed, though only for a select

group. Each new success may be seen as a memorial to what was destroyed in its wake.

That is why the "media market" Croatian-style, instead of the usual liberal refrains, implies a racket, blackmail, a political green light and profound respect for the already established citadels of power. "Adapting to the market" in such circumstances means accepting so many compromises that the fundamental principles of the journalist's profession — if that still means anything — are inevitably betrayed.

Feral Tribune was not prepared to compromise. It failed to read "the spirit of the times", as those malicious analysts would say. It is entirely understandable that it failed on the market. Croatia will not become better as a result, though it *will* become more "commercially interesting".

All these elements emerged with crystal clarity during the tragicomic negotiations with Europapress Holding, upon which we embarked in the naive belief that it was possible to retain editorial autonomy "inside the system" without the burden of advertising, and that a powerful media company — one of two that have taken control of virtually the entire media landscape in Croatia — might be demonstrating a certain inclination towards the emancipation of society.

But the two major media corporations in Croatia evidently function on the principle of total loyalty to the powers that be — to the extent that their editors-in-chief write collective pamphlets against their own journalists if they blather something stupid about their owners. They eventually came to realize, in this case correctly, that the level of loyalty in *Feral Tribune* would not be such as to guarantee "successful business outcomes". For instance, if you write about Todoric's *Agrokor*,² you are working directly against "successful business outcomes" — and you cannot be a journalist if you do not contribute to the success of the company. This means that you are a journalist mainly on the basis of what you do not write about, which illustrates just how complex a problem we have.

Negotiations with EPH began as long as four years ago [2004], on the initiative of Ninoslav Pavic.³ Things proceeded slowly but, at least at the verbal level, smoothly: help in the form of credit and a postponement in the payment of printing costs to *Slobodna Dalmacija*, owned by EPH, would constitute EPH's holding in the *Feral Tribune*. Because we would not have agreed to negotiations on any other terms, the editorial autonomy of the existing board was guaranteed. We were enthusiastic at the proposed arrangement and made this clear. In the summer of 2007, a preliminary agreement was signed and witnessed by the public notary.

And then, with all the paperwork finally prepared — silence. The owners and managers of the company successfully evaded all our attempts to contact them. They refused to respond to our written enquiry as to whether they had withdrawn from signing the agreement or to give any clear indication as to their plans; it was as though they had never received our letter. The junior officials, who up to this point had been asking for balance sheets, business plans and articles of incorporation, declared they "lacked authority".

When we realized that we were dealing with a unilateral suspension of negotiations, devoid of the most elementary courtesy, we tried to comprehend the whole process logically, but without success. Our only conclusion was that

we were trapped in some sort of debtors' prison, prevented from contacting any other potential partners.

Or maybe it went something like this: given that throughout the negotiations *Feral Tribune* had insisted on nothing more than the editorial autonomy of the board — other conditions were more or less irrelevant to us — the only logical conclusion was that it was precisely this editorial autonomy that became the stumbling block for EPH, even though they had energetically endorsed it in the course of the negotiations. But if that was the case, as seems likely, then the negotiations were doomed from the start. So why had they begun at all?

It is hard to judge: it is not easy to understand the reasons for hysteria, whether real or sham. One thing, however, is certain: EPH's entire negotiating process with *Feral Tribune* represents an abject success for the most powerful media corporation in Croatia.

Through the decade and a half of its existence, *Feral Tribune* has written about subjects that other media outlets have not touched. It has uncovered truths that others have concealed. It has voiced opinions from which others cringed. In those fifteen years, the paper and its journalists have received more international recognition and awards than the whole of Croatian journalism in its entire history.

To our readers, without whom that could not have happened, we express our gratitude for their loyalty and unselfish support. The editorial board of *Feral Tribune* will do its utmost to re-launch the paper, as soon as possible.

¹ EPH, the German–Croatian media group in which the German media group WAZ has a 50 per cent share — ed.

² The holding company of the Croatian businessman Ivica Todoric who allegedly made his fortune and bought up a substantial part of the country's business enterprises with dubious loans backed by the government at the highest level — ed.

³ Founder and publisher of Europapress Holding.

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