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Serbia: Media manoeuvres in a wounded society

The iconic Serbian broadcaster B92 was founded in 1989 in the expectation of a new era of media independence. But Serbia had reckoned without Slobodan Milosevic. With rare exceptions, the media became a key part of his nationalist propaganda arsenal. Along with other courageous publications and individuals, B92 survived the war into the new, more open media climate. But like society itself, the media bears the scars of war, writes B92 founder Veran Matic.

Nothing changes overnight, particularly in terms of the balance and distribution of power. Just as 20 years ago, on the one hand Serbia has a government that directly or indirectly controls some of the most influential and popular media outlets, and on the other, media that have been "amalgamated" with a political party and reflect its views. Then there are outlets with no affiliation or responsibility towards anyone and who pursue their own interest. Finally, there are those media outlets that still endeavour to maintain a high level of professionalism and objectivity, and that operate independently of government and political parties.

Nothing, of course, is ideal, clear-cut or straightforward on the media scene. There is no magic formula for an ideal relationship between government and media, between commercialization and social responsibility. Every society has its own idiosyncrasies, traditions, different historical and political experiences. As a result, it is impossible to come up with a one-size-fits-all model that would satisfy all the stakeholders in a highly complex media power game.

Serbia carries the heavy burden of its recent past, marked by both external and internal conflicts, disparities and divisions, not only on the national, political or religious front, but also at the level of diverse regional, generational, professional, educational, gender-related and cultural backgrounds. Politically related conflicts continue to predominate and the prospect of a fundamental change in attitude seems remote. Economic progress and development have not been made a government priority, and while this may in part be a result of the present global economic crisis, there are other reasons.

For one thing, Serbia has not been through a process of national reconciliation nor dealt with its past. While "hate speech" is much less evident than it was in the days when the media was an instrument of Milosevic's policy, there is the danger that it will burst out again whenever the country is faced with divisive new issues on a national level. When the country undergoes political turmoil, nationalist slogans come to the surface in exactly the same form as before. Today, the flash point could easily be Kosovo.

Serbs in Kosovo are now a minority and their rights are constantly being violated, particularly in the Serb majority enclaves; assistance from Serbia and abroad has not helped improve their situation. The Serb majority population in north Kosovo, bordering Serbia, do not accept Kosovo's declaration of independence and, in effect, run a state within a state. The region is dominated by radical nationalists and the potential for ethnic conflict is ever present. Balanced and unbiased reporting from the region, especially from southern Serbia where an Albanian minority is located, is vital. However, the Kosovo issue figures in the Serbian media almost exclusively as a political problem: concerns are confined to matters surrounding its status and the derogation of Serbia's sovereignty, to the exclusion of anything about the everyday life of people in the region. While everything related to Kosovo's history, tradition, mythology, industry and demographics are well known, the life of the people caught up in the situation goes virtually unmentioned. In this respect, the current Serbian media landscape bears a striking resemblance to that during the disastrous period before the collapse of the Milosevic regime in 2000, when political manipulation of the media was rife. While such negative strains persist, draconian media laws and state repression of the media critical of state policies are, fortunately, a thing of the past.

As a rule, in divided societies — or to use the term coined by V. S. Naipaul in relation to India — in "wounded" societies, the media can contribute either to opening up or insulating a country or society. In Serbia, the media's role can be illustrated by its attitude towards ideas and political platforms that advocate European integration and the internationalization of the country. Outlets that oppose such political programmes adopt editorial policies based on the dissemination of fear, suspicion and loathing of everything European. Europe is portrayed as a place of alienation inhabited by people with unnatural and conflict-ridden lifestyles. Other outlets idealize life in Europe. The state media stick to the dominant political positions, particularly with respect to Serbia's Kosovo policy. Kosovo is increasingly becoming the measure not only of "patriotism" but also of one's attitude towards Europe.

The more extreme forms of state censorship and intimidation are largely a thing of the past and there is considerable freedom to express one's views and opinions. But there are no clear boundaries between what is permissible and what is not; no legal guarantee of media autonomy. It is the business of individual media outlets to win more or less freedom and independence. In this sense, the situation is much the same as it was: those media that are willing to fight for their status and independence still do.

In this context, the term "freedom of expression" carries a certain ambiguity. When that freedom is not accompanied by a sense of responsibility, as is frequently the case, it becomes a double-edged sword. Free expression is available to all, but when it is regularly abused in the tabloids and other outlets in pursuit of particular political ends it becomes discredited to the disadvantage of all. Given the absence of any form of self-regulation or adequate media code, it is easier to fight for freedom than to ensure it is used with responsibility. At best, the judiciary functions poorly, making it virtually impossible to fight for and achieve higher professional standards through legal means. The legal profession is still strongly divided, both institutionally and politically: there are two rival associations, one pro-regime, made up former Milosevic supporters, and an independent one. As such, the authorities are able to keep it weak and ineffective. The adoption of new media legislation is well behind schedule and the government has ignored the outcome of public debates on the draft bills.¹

There are, however, much more sophisticated ways of exerting pressure on media reluctant to curry favour with those in power. These are dominantly financial pressures exerted through big media–time buyers and advertisers. Those media outlets that are run or controlled by the state thanks to its majority stake, often in conjunction with prominent financial oligarchs, enjoy preferential treatment in the form of subsidies, tax allowances and other benefits. They also receive additional financial injections in the form of tacit commitments by large state–run and privately–owned companies to advertise in these media.

The situation in Serbia is not as drastic as, for instance, in Croatia, where the failure to secure advertising and the withdrawal of marketing revenues recently brought about the death of one of the best European publications, *Feral Tribune*.² This was not recognized as a serious problem at the international level, even though it was evident that between them, state, media and business monopolies could easily ruin a media outlet.

But Serbia's biggest problem remains the information "spin" that emanates from the political power centres in conjunction with big business. Politicians are economically dependent on the tycoons, themselves often monopolists, and this frequently carries over into direct co–ownership of media outlets. Big business interests confront us with another serious problem — investigative journalism. Any in–depth investigation into how certain businessmen earned their first million, for instance, frequently carries with it the risk that business relations will be severed, contracts broken and advertising withdrawn. This, of course, is yet one more form of economic pressure on media outlets. The influence of organized crime is strong, and few media dare fight it. B92 does and, as a result, suffers the consequences.

Things are quite different for the tabloids. Many companies pay for advertising space and support the tabloids financially in order to be able to launch orchestrated campaigns against particular targets. A career can be destroyed for a little as 500 euros; a counter attack is equally possible but will cost a good deal more. Manipulation such as this discredits the journalistic profession and costs it the trust of the public. There is no sense of public interest in the media as a whole and no focus on its protection. As a result, the public seems lost, unable to recognize what is true and what false, caught somewhere between illusion and reality.

The key problem here is the fact that "public service", as generally understood in the context of Public Service Broadcasting, has failed to impose itself in a genuine fashion; the programme schedules of Serbia's two PSB channels are little different from those of the commercial sector; as a result, all broadcasters in Serbia, including PSB, are commercial, with very similar programming concepts.

There are seven television networks with national broadcast licenses in Serbia. Two, RTS 1 and RTS 2, the supposedly PSB channels, belong to the state broadcaster; the remaining five are commercial national TV stations. Given the size of Serbia's population (8 million), this seems excessive. Neighbouring Croatia (population 4.5 million) has only three national television networks. Serbia's media policy on this front is gradually sidelining serious, professional TV programming and production, and effectively promoting cheap, light entertainment as well as dependence on the state and financial tycoons. Despite the fast growth of the advertising market in Serbia in recent years, it remains immature — in 2004 the advertising market was five times smaller than in

Croatia in a population almost twice the size — and cannot sustain so many broadcasters, particularly at a time when major companies across the world are cutting their advertising budgets. A responsible media policy that restricted the number of licenses issued could have an impact, but there is currently no attempt to employ regulatory mechanisms that would help create a more favourable environment for the financial sustainability of commercial electronic media. A policy that reduced exorbitant annual broadcast fees could still have an impact — the fees paid by Serbian broadcasters are the highest in the region — particularly if this were accompanied by more stringent rules on commercial advertising in public service broadcasting. However, the centres of political power in the country seem to prefer weak and cash-strapped media outlets that are, inevitably in the circumstances, more susceptible to political pressure.

In this situation, if a broadcaster makes a decision to increase the amount of programming that could properly be designated as PSB, it often does so to its own disadvantage. There are no financial incentives for those broadcasters devoted to airing educational programmes or news and investigative reports, no general "contract" or consensus between media and government on the need for this sort of programming. Nevertheless, B92 is committed through its provision of programmes that will inform the public on the subject, to the modernization of our country and its integration into the European process. To this end, we have launched numerous campaigns within our CSR (corporate social responsibility) department. Last year, through a number of campaigns, we gathered funds amounting to 5 per cent of our annual revenue.³

This is one of the ways to establish trust with an audience, and the only beneficiaries of these campaigns are the citizens of Serbia. However, it creates a potentially dangerous situation: commitment to a proper public service remit can jeopardize the commercial interests of owners, shareholders and employees. Fortunately, B92's co-owners are sympathetic to our commitment to public service; although B92 Trust owns only 35 per cent of company shares, it has complete editorial control and shareholders who support its editorial policy.

To a considerable extent, thanks to its professionalism and the values it promotes, RTV B92 has succeeded in establishing its reputation as the broadcaster most trusted by the general public. It has established an appropriate balance of popular entertainment — such as the introduction of the internationally successful "Big Brother" series — and serious reporting. This is particularly the case with Radio B92, the most listened-to radio station in Serbia. Nonetheless, both our radio and television remain under constant pressure: threats have become part of our everyday life. This was particularly conspicuous during the term of the previous Prime Minister, Vojislav Kostunica, when mass demonstrations in protest against Kosovo's declaration of independence were organized in the capital in February 2008. Hooligans set out to attack and burn RTV B92's building. At the last moment, with the assistance of a government minister from the Democratic Party, the thugs were stopped by riot police.

I mention this to illustrate my point that physical threats and assaults on media and journalists have not yet been stamped out. Under Milosevic, we knew that the secret police was behind virtually every act of violence targeting the media or journalists; today, the situation is more complex. There are parallel centres of power, operating behind the scenes and using marginal groups such as football fans and hooligans to warn and force defiant media or

non-governmental organizations to toe the line. Serbia's emerging democracy, along with its media scene, are still stuck in the rough waters of instability and insecurity. This, coupled with the grave economic and social situation and the Kosovo issue, constitutes an explosive mixture that may be ignited at any moment by a seemingly banal incident. This makes the role of an independent professional media and the civil sector as a whole more crucial than ever. It would be a grave error to disregard this fact now that the old authoritarian regime appears, on the face of things, to be deeply buried in the past. Those international organizations and foreign governments that helped the independent media and the non-governmental sector — without which no country can call itself democratic — survive and develop in the past, should not forget that Serbia's fragile democracy still needs their help.

Given the weakness of the political parties and the fragility of ruling coalitions, formed by the alliance of highly diverse political groupings, successive governments have feared the media and its journalists and still do. When it comes to the distribution of power across the spectrum of office, ministries function as mini governments with every minister operating as prime minister within his or her ministry. Rivalry among ministers is acute and internal weaknesses force the various factions to maintain good relations with the media using any means at their disposal: bribery, "spin" or, should the owner of a particular outlet be involved in the "gray area" of the economy, intimidation.

Though government fears journalists, neither it nor the public respects them as a profession. Journalists continue to occupy a low status, with corresponding wages, and are subject to legal — libel and defamation suits — and physical attack. When B92 journalists faced physical attacks last year, the government launched an initiative that would have put journalists in the same category as public servants and treated them accordingly. Ostensibly, this would have strengthened the rule of law and improved measures to protect journalists. This is not the solution. Journalists must organize on their own behalf more effectively than at present. Additionally, they must show a united front and act accordingly if they want to improve their status. This is the only way they can begin to deal with the numerous incidents of physical violence and murders that have been visited on them and their colleagues in the past and contribute to seeing an end of such treatment. If they act together as a professional body, there is nothing to prevent them drawing up a list of minimum demands and presenting this to government and their employers. This could be the beginning of some form of contract that would, in turn, enable journalists to do their jobs decently and honourably.

Foreign media owners, such as the Swiss Ringier Company, which owns three daily newspapers and a series of weeklies, have contributed a good deal to improving the role of journalists. On the other hand, I am under the impression that at *Politika*, Serbia's oldest daily in which the German media group WAZ now has a 50 per cent holding, the editorial team find it hard to steer a course between the management, who have a "golden vote" on business dealings, and the state, who has a "golden vote" on editorial policy. It's hard to see how they can make any progress if they can't resolve the present situation. Most other companies care very little about the status and position of their journalists.

Training programmes are essential for our profession and they should be organized in a systematic and purposeful way. Other than training them for political propaganda, as in the past, education for journalists has been neglected for years. Along with the development of new technologies,

journalism calls for ongoing professional education, for which the media often has no funds available. At B92, we were lucky enough to be funded by a training grant from the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR). We designed the programme ourselves to fit our needs and indicated our preferred trainers. The course was implemented jointly by the BBC and ECBJ (European Centre for Broadcast Journalism) and was highly successful. Random educational programmes implemented merely because a certain institution has allocated funds for the purpose are not the most effective way forward; things need to be tailored to existing needs and applied accordingly.

Global crises always have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable. With the world's broadcast and print media itself in crisis, it is the independent sector that is most at risk, made vulnerable by its very *raison d'être*. This is why all options that might help preserve this sector must be considered as a matter of urgency, particularly in those countries with recently established democracies. At times, these seem keen to rid themselves of vitally important independent institutions because of their critical stances towards government, rather than seeing them as aids in building a democratic society.

In the same way that states worldwide may count on the IMF for assistance in averting bankruptcy or financial disaster, independent media and NGOs should be able to rely on a similar safety net that would help them in times of trouble. No such institution exists and, in times such as these, therein lies the danger.

In addition to local solidarity, a global response to the most vulnerable independent institutions is badly needed. The global economy is in turmoil and the world's financial institutions are weighing their options. The media, too, must reconsider their role, though not at the cost of their values and independence. Some may call these outdated and accuse them of entertaining romantic notions more suitable to times past. But given that they have, so far, stood the test of time, are we really to believe this?

¹ See: B92, "Media in Serbia", <http://www.b92.net/english/special/rds/media.php>

² See Viktor Ivancic "The end of the road" in Eurozine
<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-20-ivancic-en.html>

³ See: B92 "Social Activities and Campaigns 2007-2008",
http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/reports.php?yyyy=2008&mm=06&nav_id=51131.

Published 2009-03-20

Original in English

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