

MEDIA IN SERBIA

Days after the fall of Milosevic, the media under control of the former regime changed their content. Without manipulation and strict control, propaganda disappeared. Many more changes of the media were announced.

Nowadays, propaganda is still absent and overall most media outlets provide reasonably accurate and unbiased information.

Yet while the content changed, the structures remained the same. The process of legal transformation of the media is still pretty much at square one. Many legal changes remained unfinished; the national television has not been transformed into a public service; in many media the ownership structure remains unclear and the principles for awarding television frequencies are yet to be established.

At this moment in Serbia, according to unfortunately not very reliable estimates, around 500 radio and 250 television stations are broadcasting their programs on a regular basis. The bulk of those stations are operating without the required licenses and without legally attributed frequencies. This is largely due to significant delays within the government in adopting a Broadcast Law, which was finally enacted in June 2002, and subsequent problems with the implementation, including several rows over the Broadcasting Council. This body is supposed to regulate the broadcast media, yet the composition and legality of the council is contested.

Radio Television of Serbia remains in state ownership, and the process of its conversion into a public broadcasting service has not effectively started. Still, RTS's editors have managed to provide unbiased reporting. The best rated station is Pink Television, due to an entertainment dominated program and a large number of sitcoms and films. Pink's owner, once a loyal partner of Milosevic's government, is now close to the current government. B92 Television plays an increasingly important role in the news business, benefiting from an improved news program and increased territorial coverage, and has jumped to third place in the ratings after it acquired the rights to broadcast Champions league football matches. The fourth rated station is BK Television, the owner of which is one the wealthiest people from Milosevic's former entourage.

In Serbia more than an dozen national newspapers are published on daily basis. In spite of a small market and limited number of newspaper readers, the number of dailies is increasing. There are also about a dozen weekly magazines.

There are two major and one small news agency. The problem is that the state did not give up ownership, financing and control over the state controlled Tanjug news agency, while at the same time it allows the state company to sell its subsidized news service on the market. This distorts market equality. The larger private agency, Beta, and the smaller one, Fonet, are paying the price. Nevertheless, the media seem to put more trust in private news agencies, for they remember Tanjug's repulsive propaganda during its role as mouthpiece of Milosevic's regime. The government shows no intent of relinquishing the ownership and control of Tanjug.

The influence of political parties, wealthy business people, police and military secret services and, until recently, organized crime, is obvious in many media outlets. What's more, media analysts can clearly determine the political and business affiliation of a paper or smaller TV or radio station.

The lack of quality journalist and editorial personnel is an acute problem of the media in Serbia today. In spite of intensive additional training and improved quality of journalism courses on the Faculty of Political Sciences, the results are still inadequate.

Media legislation

The lack of media laws as well as the persistent refusal of the government to start implementing the already adopted media laws is undoubtedly the primary problem of printed and electronic media in Serbia.

After many postponements and several different versions, the Serbian assembly adopted in June 2002 the Draft Broadcasting Law. This law was drafted by a group of media experts and lawyers and its provisions are in line with European standards. Domestic radio and television stations have contributed with their opinions through a comprehensive public debate.

Nevertheless, the government has at the very adoption of the Draft Law managed to change the most important provision of this law – the number of members of the Broadcasting Council and the manner of their appointment. While this was their political prerogative, it diminished the body's independence and tied it closer with the government.

The appointment of members of the Broadcasting Council – the time spent on the procedure as well as certain personal choices – has triggered (political) problems between the government on one side and the media and the civil society on the other. The fact that procedures for nomination were not followed by the parliament and the appointment of an controversial chairman of the Broadcasting Council resulted in the resignation of two members of the Council, a blockade in that body's activities and lost confidence in something which should have become operational and respectable.

The formal existence of the Broadcasting Council to date did not result in the approval of a any concrete decision and the situation in the domain of frequencies and electronic media has remained unchanged as compared to the years of dictatorship in Serbia.

A particular problem is the issue of national coverage. The main contenders for it are the Radio-Television of Serbia and its two channels, but also a professional and independent station such as B92, as well as Pink Television, the entertainment-dominated program with regular news bulletins. The majority of media analysts think that Pink Television could be the one to be awarded the license for national coverage at the expense of B92.

Together with the Broadcasting Law, the only law that was adopted is the Law on Public Information. This Law has also been put in line with European standards and journalists' needs.

The Law on Public Information, however, does not contain provisions on Access to Information, as it has been planned to regulate this in a separate law. Despite that several blueprints of an Access to Information law have been tabled, the Serbian Assembly failed to discuss it, with no indications that there will be such a debate anytime soon.

The misdemeanour of calumny, which is rather frequent in light of the growing animosity between journalists and politicians, is still being treated pursuant to the provisions of the Criminal Code. A large number of court proceedings are underway against journalists, but due to feet dragging and the slowness of the judiciary. The media community awaits decisions which could point out future practice in such cases.

Considering the unfavourable situation in the domain of media legislation, the appeal that the Serbian media have been launching for quite some time now to the international community is pertaining above all to the need to put decisive pressure on Serbian authorities to allow the normal functioning of the Broadcasting Council as soon as possible, by repeating the appointment of all the members of this body and urgently start the debate on the adoption of the Law on Free Access to Information.

Professionalism

Mostly thanks to a very developed independent media sector, which played an important role in the removal of the former regime, as well as to journalists of those media who have managed to uphold professional standards and ethics, Serbia does have quality editors and journalists. Their number is, however, insufficient for the huge number of print and electronic media in the country.

On the other hand, for years Serbia didn't have a decent journalism school or college which would deliver well-trained staff. Hence the lack of journalists, especially the ones specialized for different areas of reporting, is more than obvious in every news room.

Presently, the program at the Faculty of Political Sciences has been greatly streamlined and modernized – that Faculty being the only university in Serbia educating future journalists. Broadcast media training is provided by the ANEM (the Association of Independent Electronic Media) Training Center. In addition, there are a number of serious institutions which provide courses and additional journalist education.

Partly due to a feeling among many (if not all) donors that training is needed, a somewhat chaotic situation in the field of training emerged. Many courses are poorly publicized, often overlapping and with inadequate or wrongly positioned programs.

The education of journalists and Serbian media staff in general is indispensable and most welcome, particularly the ones taking place in the media outlets themselves in the presence of foreign and domestic trainers. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a journalists' education system, harmonize that system with the real needs and put it in line with the activities of domestic institutions.

Journalists' Associations / watchdog organizations

Journalists in Serbia can be members of several journalists' associations – The Association of Journalists of Serbia, the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia, the Society of Journalists of Vojvodina (a province of Serbia), the Association of Journalists of Belgrade News desks, etc. A Journalists' Trade Union, as a separate branch of one of the existing Trade Unions, does not exist.

The Association of Journalists' of Serbia and the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia have the largest membership. The former was founded as early back as before the Second World War and for decades was the only association of journalists in the country. Since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the association cooperated with Milosevic' regime and the top of the association were the then editors and managers of the most important national media.

The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia was created in the early nineties by journalists who opposed Milosevic and worked in independent media. The association played a role in gathering opposition voices. Today, several well known and influential journalist figures are member and the association continues to try and contribute to the development of independent media and education of journalists.

Electronic media in Serbia have two associations – ANEM (the Association of Independent Electronic Media) and Spectra (Association of Private Electronic Media). Radio and television stations belonging to the ANEM network are very well connected, exchanging programs and most often operating together on the market. A large number of these independent stations have played an important role in raising awareness about the need for government change in Serbia. ANEM's persisting problem continues to be the lack of quality foreign program and journalists and investigative reporters specialized for certain areas.

A number of print media have founded the Association of Print Media (APM). After a long delay, recently a modern joint printing facility was opened of which the members of APM can profit. The printing plant is supported by France, Denmark, Germany, EC and Unesco.

Donors and International Organizations

The role of donors in the media sphere in Serbia in the last couple of years was of key importance. The appearance and growth of independent media and subsequently their impact would not have been possible without direct donor assistance. During the whole time of the ten-year struggle for regime-change and media independence, a great role was played by important donors such as the Open Society Fund, Irex ProMedia, USAID, the European Union, the European Agency for Reconstruction, the Norwegian People's Aid, Swedish Helsinki Committee, Press Now, the Friedrich Ebert and Conrad Adenauer Foundations, as well as by Western governments who aided media projects in Serbia bilaterally, via the Stability Pact and / or other institutions.

Donor assistance was mainly in the form of financial aid to the foundation of the media (necessary equipment procurement) or media institution, and then assistance for individual projects realized by the media. A considerable part of donors' funds has been allocated for education and training of journalists and other media staff. Donors have also aided work on media laws.

At this moment, the presence of donors, as well as their media support in Serbia, have been considerably reduced. That fact undoubtedly makes life harder for many media outlets, for the market in Serbia does not work according to well established rules. That makes the option of self-financing almost impossible for many, especially for smaller local media. At the same time, such a state of affairs forces serious and analytical media to refocus their work towards entertainment-related content to get better ratings or to sell more copies.

Donor assistance to electronic and print media in the production of quality domestic program is still vital to increase quality and ensure higher ratings. It would at the same time represent another major step towards the empowerment and self-financing of the media that have up to now exclusively relied on donor assistance.

In view of the current financial situation of the journalists and media in Serbia, it is still impossible to organize a system of journalist education on a purely commercial basis. Therefore donor assistance in a systematized and well organized system of additional education, in line with existing resources, is useful. Considering the fact that national television is entering a process of serious transformation and reorganization, as well as the fact that this process requires a lot of money, donor assistance in the transformation of RTS into a public broadcasting service would be welcome. This, however, requires strict conditions for Radio Television of Serbia – no political pressure on the broadcaster.

The lack of progress in media legislation and regulation requires more efforts to ensure fair conditions, harmonization and systematization. This is unlikely to move rapidly without both political and financial support from donors and international organizations. As was the case to date, support should be given to drafting legislation and monitoring implementation by assisting institutions and experts in the country.

International institutions could play a major role by putting pressure on the current Serbian government to be more prompt and up to date when it comes to the implementation of new laws, especially in the

adoption of the Law on Free Access to Information. A particularly important step would be for the international community to publicly call on the Serbian authorities to make possible the repetition of the appointment of the members of the Broadcasting Council and to allow this body to start working on the important tasks it is charged with.

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