

**ON THE TRAIL OF A REPORT BY THE TEMPORARY MEDIA COMMISSIONER IN
KOSOVO: ABUSE OF *CINEMA VERITE* IN TV JOURNALISM**

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Tragic events in Kosovo in mid-March this year again brought into limelight the shameful role of the media in the region. In this case, the stigma is primarily on Albanian-language broadcasters seated in Pristina. Specifically, it regards three TV stations: Radio-Television Kosovo (RTK), as a public broadcaster, and two commercial stations – Kohavision (KTV) and TV 21. The immediate cause of harsh accusations regarding the non-professionalism and irresponsibility of these TV companies are the already mentioned tragic events near Kosovska Mitrovica, whose final result is 22 dead and hundreds of wounded. The undivided opinion, which, unfortunately, is not shared by all Albanian colleagues, is that the three most watched TV stations in Kosovo carry a lion's share of responsibility for the casualties, and it cannot be ruled out at all that we will soon have a mini version of the Rwanda syndrome in Kosovo. To recall, radio journalists there have already been suspected of war crimes for openly calling for mutual tribal killings.

The so-called international community promptly reacted to the non-professionalism of Albanian broadcasters in Kosovo, and in a way these reactions are sublimated in three extensive reports that appeared at about the same time, approximately a month after the tragic events: by the OSCE Mission to Kosovo, International Crisis Group (ICG) and Temporary Media Commissioner (TMC).

The OSCE report did not deal exclusively with broadcasters, but with the print media as well, and during the presentation of the report in the Vienna OSCE seat, its Representative on Media Freedom, the recently appointed Miklos Haraszti, said that TV reports on the March unrest were similar to Serbian media reports from the time of Milosevic's dictatorship. The recurring theme of the ICG report is that the March reports constituted a return to a psychosis of war. And the already former Kosovo

Administrator Harri Holkeri, in his report to the UN Security Council, also criticized Kosovo Albanian-language media reports on the March riots and unrest.

Reliance on Unverified Sources

Here, however, we will take a deeper look at the report issued by the Temporary Media Commissioner, Robert Gillette, which, as said above, deals exclusively with the non-professionalism of the three leading TV companies in Kosovo. Robert Gillette was earlier highly ranked in the former Independent Media Commission (IMC) in Sarajevo, now Communication Regulatory Agency (RAK/CRA). By the way, Bosnian-Herzegovinian experiences from the post-Dayton period were used in Kosovo to a certain degree in regulating the media.

Introductory remarks proceed from the case of disappearance of three Albanian boys (March 16), believed to have drowned in the Ibar River, in the vicinity of Kosovska Mitrovica. Over the next few hours, one of the boys was found. However, without any verification, TV reports attributed the deaths of the two boys to Serbs, which immediately raised tensions in the already tense multiethnic relations in Mitrovica and broader. The next morning, organized demonstrations of school kids and war veterans turned into unrest and riots. In addition to the already mentioned casualties (the report uses the figure of 11 Albanians and eight Serbs), it is also stated that hundreds of Serb homes, buildings and churches were torched or looted, and that more than 4,000 people sought shelter and protection in SFOR bases. Many valuable monuments of the Serbian medieval architectural heritage, mostly sacral buildings, ended up in ashes.

The report investigates the conduct of the three most influential TV stations in Kosovo, each one covering approximately 70 percent of Kosovo's population, which, no doubt, constitutes a representative media sample.

Monitoring and investigation was strictly limited in terms of time to the critical period: from Tuesday, March 16, in the evening, i.e. from the appearance of the first news on the boys' deaths, through organized demonstrations, to eruption of violence which spread to the whole of Kosovo in the course of the next day.

The purpose of the investigation was to identify cases of violation of the TMC Code, acceptance of some, evidently not learned, lessons, based on which future support to media development in Kosovo would be more efficient.

In this unfortunate episode, whether consciously or not, the huge effect of television as a medium was neglected, in particular in an atmosphere of severely disturbed interethnic relations in the territory covered. It is highly unprofessional and irresponsible to report on the basis of rumors and speculation, without first verifying sources of information. When this is done, television becomes a tool and catalyst of violence, as we witnessed in Kosovo.

The TMC report is well laid out and well conceived. It is divided into three parts, plus a transcript annex. For each part, namely for each monitored TV station, the report first provides relevant facts, practically a catalog of events, on the basis of which conclusions were drawn, and in the end it gives recommendations.

Understandably, most space was given to Radio-Television Kosovo (RTK), as a public broadcaster, whose responsibility, due to the nature and position of the media outlet, is the most pronounced. In this specific case, responsibility for RTK's non-professionalism was established. The report indicates with full right the dangerous concept of TV journalism which rests upon a *cinema verite* technique. All is left to image, seemingly speaking objectively and expressively, which is absolutely true, but the context of events is neglected or even completely left out. At the critical time, footage "without comment" was aired conspicuously, serving as an excellent pretext for eruption of violence. By the way, the term *cinema verite* is related to a trend expressed mostly in French film in the early sixties of the last century, when pure realism, or film of truth, was insisted upon.

The joint omission of all three TV companies is that they took the deaths of the two boys as fait accompli, despite numerous warnings from UNMIK officials that the circumstances of the boys' tragic deaths have not been cleared up yet and that the media should take this important factor into account. To illustrate, in its initial reports, the BBC used the phrase "the boys drowned under mysterious circumstances."

Creating an Atmosphere of Lynch

The key moment, practically the detonating cap for eruption of violence, was the appearance of the surviving boy who said in front of cameras that they had sought shelter in the water running away from Serbs who were chasing them. It did not help the least bit when this same traumatized boy said the next day that they had not actually been running away from Serbs, but from a dog. The story was then garnished with the detail that the Serbs had set the dogs on the Albanian boys. In statements on the occasion, using inflammatory rhetoric, parallels were drawn with the holocaust and lynch!

RTK made an indicative editorial move, changing its regular programming schedule. Commercials were removed and serious music was aired, which is characteristic of times of national mourning.

It is interesting that the report directly accuses management of non-professionalism and irresponsibility, rather than editors!? When we contacted R. Gillette to explain this, he confirmed that RTK management bears direct responsibility for the media outlet's non-professionalism. He said he saw this for himself during a visit on March 17, when the director and his deputy, together with the editor-in-chief, were creating and dictating how the station would report!

KTV's most distinct omission is related to reports from Gnjilani, where a classical lynch of a Serb occurred, but was covered up with a dry statement that one of the 30 wounded had succumbed to his injuries. According to verified information, this person had a Kalashnikov on himself, which he had not used. After a large group of young Albanians seized his rifle, he was stabbed with a knife, and then trampled to death.

KTV also played horror footage without comment, but with lesser intensity in comparison to RTK. After a long evening interview with Veton Suroi, KTV's reporting was significantly corrected in positive terms.

In the main conclusion in the part on TV 21, the report says that this TV company behaved the most professionally and most responsibly. It strived towards balanced reporting, trying to reduce the potential undesirable effects of insisting on *cinema*

verite images, which evidently, in the conditions of Kosovo's cheerless reality, only incite emotions and passions.

TV 21's credibility is confirmed by public opinion research (this detail is not mentioned in the report) carried out after the March events by the Index Kosova agency in cooperation with Gallup International, which says that trust in RTK's and KTV's reporting has considerably fallen, while trust in TV 21's reporting has considerably risen, which is an indicative piece of information.

The most frequently mentioned violation of the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters is related to Article 2, Paragraphs 2.2 and 2.3, on refraining from airing items that incite violence and inspire ethnic and religious intolerance.

The joint recommendation for all three TV companies has to do with a need to organize training on conflict reporting.

After all three reports were published, journalists spoke up. Baton Haxhiu, Executive Director of the Association of Professional Journalists of Kosovo (AGPK), on behalf of his colleagues, accepted the criticism regarding non-professionalism in their ranks, admitting there had been emotional reports and reliance on unverified sources and news, but at the same time stressing that there was exaggeration in the reports, especially in the context of blowing out of proportion the role of the media in Kosovo society. Haxhiu concluded his discourse with the stand that the Kosovo media is faced with a crucial dilemma – to report, or to be a part of censorship? This is evidently a false dilemma, because the topmost task of the media is to report facts, but without at the same time neglecting the broader social context of the events that are reported or written about.

Note: For the integral TMC Report, see www.osce.org/omik

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