

HATE SPEECH IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN SERBIA

Dubravka Valic – Nedeljkovic

August 31, 2004

*Published in the Regional newsletter for promotion of culture of
minority rights and inter-ethnic tolerance*

What is hate speech reflected in? It is most evident openly at a lexical level, but it is less present there, while the level of media “talk” is more subtle, harder to identify, but much more present.

One should also differentiate hate speech on the part of those participating in political campaigns, which is directly carried by the media, from hate speech designed by the media itself, using diverse, not so evident, mechanisms, of course under the influence of different centers of power, i.e. political elites. Let us recall, in this light, Marshall McLuhan’s axiom that “medium is message.” Applied to media creation of hate speech, it acquires a possible new interpretation.

Election campaigns in the electronic media, television first of all, are reflected in several genres: news and reports on happenings created by parties in the framework of campaigns; roundtables and duels, as well as candidate presentations initiated as media happenings by the media itself; and finally, TV video clips as a readily used form of political marketing, into which parties invest quite a lot of the money set aside for campaigns.

Better, But Still Not Good

Research has shown that the media has become much more tolerant since the year 2000 in covering election gatherings. Let us recall, for instance, that RNS primetime news and political programs, in the first four days of the last week before the 1992 vote, dedicated 63.61 percent of the total time set aside for elections to the promotion of two of the seven registered candidates for president of Serbia. The ruling party (SPS) representative and head

of state at the same time (S. Milosevic), for promoting his ideas, in addition to extensive sound material, had a real radio spectacle lasting 48.84 percent of the total time in the bloc of election activities, while the second candidate (M. Panic) only had 3.65 percent, with very modest audio support. We find similar data in analysis of RBGD programs. Expressed in minutes, the total duration of reports on Milosevic's activity is 60 minutes and 35 seconds, while on M. Panic's activities it is 11 minutes and 45 seconds. Events in whose center was the candidate Milosevic were treated as visits by the president of the state to different regions in Serbia, with ovations of the unanimously enthusiastic people, while other events in whose focus was the candidate Panic were treated as election promotions, rather than as activities of the incumbent head of the Federal Government, without the sound background of support from like-minded people, which certainly did exist.

After the 2000 elections, which were particularly dramatic and discriminatory in the media (because for several days then state television failed to announce, either through picture or sound, that Milosevic had lost the election and that there was unrest in the streets due to non-recognition of the citizens' will), in all elections after that there was no open hate speech of this kind reflected in manipulation with the media resources (genres, duration in minutes, audio and visual quotations, placement and positioning of information in the day's media schedules, etc.). All researchers agree that the media did not violate the rules of conduct in covering election campaigns, with the exception of BK television during presidential elections (June 2004), when during election blackout it carried a report on the activities of the television station's owner and at the same time candidate for president of Serbia. True, this violation does not fall in the area of hate speech, but rather in the field of defined rules of conduct. Balance in presenting information regarding all participants in the election campaign is a part of existing media ethics in Serbia today.

Balanced, But Sterile

Meanwhile, all actors agree that campaigns are poorly covered in the media. Namely, the media covers solely conventions, street rallies and candidates' itineraries, without any analytical approach to the parties' and candidates' essential issues and programs. In the abundance of election campaigns since 1990 in Serbia's media landscape, there have been practically no articles to deeply analyze the sincerity, truthfulness, validity and realness of pre-election promises, diachronically or synchronically, comparatively in relation to others. This can also be regarded (although it is conditioned by ideological or petty political intentions, or ignorance and lack of knowledge about the journalistic trade, or some other reason) as a form of hate speech. Why? Well, because the media has not fulfilled its primary

function – to enable citizens, who are stronger when informed, to participate with more awareness in everyday political practice.

Hence, media language, when all elements are well analyzed, has been, more or less openly, colored by political prejudice.

Language of Political Actors

As for official forms, such as presentation of candidates in timeslots guaranteed and prior designated, on what used to be state television and is today the public service, then everything was predictable, lukewarm and generally not inspiring. Neither the journalists, nor the candidates were able to emerge from the standard pattern. The best example is a duel, announced in the media for a long time as a political spectacle, between Tomislav Nikolic (Serbian Radical Party) and Boris Tadic (Democratic Party) on the eve of the second election round for Serbian president 2004. The duel was so politely boring that everyone was equally disappointed. One could not single out any new element from the duel as a reason to decide who to vote for. The next day, columnists were unanimous in that the whole thing looked like well learned “lessons,” which the candidates, skillfully or less so, recited before cameras. There was no dialog, the journalistic questions came down to reminding the candidates how many minutes they have to say their “lesson” and that was it. Is this also, in a certain aspect, very subtle “hate speech”?!

But, how more ambivalent is this message from the one that Milosevic had been sending to voters for years by ceding his time for compulsory candidate presentation on state television in favor of broadcasting a documentary film with patriotic content or something similar. That move, certainly, was “hate speech” because it belittled all achievements of democratic battling using arguments, rather than force, in the political game called election campaign.

Politicians and Hate Speech

Uncontrolled statements made in front of cameras by those losing the election race should particularly be mentioned. The latest example is a statement by Serbian Radical Party presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolic who said, in the night of announcement of initial results of the just completed election for president of Serbia 2004, that the counter-candidate had won thanks to the votes of “some minorities over there.” One should recall that this same person had been emphasizing during the election campaign his great sympathies for ethnic

minorities and had been promising them that caring for minority rights was crucial in the platform of the party that this candidate has belonged to since its creation.

Election roundtables are slowly going out of fashion. Probably because they had really served as ground for direct practice of “hate speech,” from accusing the “other side” without backing what is said by facts, to speaking with one voice, arguing, at moments even shouting other participants down. From these media “opportunities,” everyone came out equally angry and disappointed by the impoliteness of others, without having anything to say about themselves. Those who were not aggressive or did not speak Serbian as their mother tongue (i.e. representatives of ethnic minority parties), if invited in the first place, could barely get a word in programs of this kind. The audience was equally disappointed; at least that part which understands that election campaign is not “war,” therefore not “war of words” either, but rather a confrontation of ideas backed by arguments. Television solved the problem in the simplest way, drastically reducing such happenings. It would have been more useful to civilize “political opponents” for public appearance.

Finally, to conclude this overview which is aimed, among other things, at showing the ways of manipulation with the media audience through messages whose intention is to create temporarily homogenized audiences for the election cycle – the political TV clip.

Pay, and then – Hate

There are about ten types of TV clips in political marketing (figure that speaks; people on the street – the voice of the people; panel clips; visual clips; documentary clips; cinema verite clips; testimony clips...). All were seen during the last 10 years on television stations in Serbia, whose number, to recall, according to some not too reliable data, is more than 300. Political parties and their campaign advisors, one must admit, have tried to have the clip portray the authority of the leader (read: candidate), who is either supported by the “broad popular masses,” or is firm and, therefore, should be voted for as “master of the house.” The clips reflect important values that are trying to be stressed and that candidates suggest to voters they have as a part of their spiritual heritage, as well as “vision.” Of course, that means patriotism, tradition, family, care for offspring, peace, security, employment, wealth, success, etc. Few try to disqualify their opponents. A clear example of hate speech in a video clip comes from the 1997 parliamentary and presidential election campaign. It regards a political election clip for JUL (Yugoslav Left) – a typical documentary clip showing opposition unrest and demonstrations in the streets of Belgrade during the time of Milosevic. The accompanying text carried a clearly discriminatory, xenophobic message based on

misinformation: “First they were tearing up what was ours, then they were carrying what was others’, while we have always had just one flag, the Yugoslav one.”

It should be stressed that the political actors during all these years, however, have tried during campaigns not to insult directly, or to violate human, minority and other rights through their statements and public appearances, on in advertising material. Hate speech was more present in informal communication, when it comes to candidates, and in the area of what is in theory called formatting and programming the media for covering election campaigns.

Dubravka Valic – Nedeljkovic is director of Novi Sad School of journalism. Translated by: K.H. © Media Online 2004. All rights reserved.