

DAILY PAPERS' FORMALISM AND YELLOW TABLOIDS' SENSATIONALISM

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At least 10 national daily papers publish in Belgrade today. At least, since the status of several other papers is not entirely clear. Some are temporarily not coming out, some are shut down, and some new editions are expected. In addition, the Serbian capital is the seat of some 10 television companies, which are pinning their hopes, with bigger or smaller chances, on one of the four planned national frequencies. The number of radio stations is difficult to even estimate. This is a field where imposing order will be painstaking work, except if the authorities decide to employ drastic measures.

The media landscape of the capital is an example of the media landscape of Serbia in general. In every city there are at least two television stations, several radio stations and at least two local dailies or weeklies. If we are going to call all of them media outlets, then Serbia has more than 1,000, and we can only guess the number of journalists working for them (especially if we include here full- and part-time stringers).

This multitude can best be seen at press conferences or similar occasions (for example, assembly sessions, statements after important trials), when as many as 20 microphones are placed in front of those who are speaking. Those who address so many media outlets probably feel honored, but they are also certain that what they say will reach the public. A journalist in this crowd can only dream of exclusivity, if he has any such dreams at all. The majority of the media outlets, namely, satisfy themselves with purely carrying statements that (mostly) politicians make, without any ambition to verify them. The most they are ready to do is to ask for the reaction of someone who may be blamed.

A consequence of working this way is that the media is full of information, mostly the same, but without any superstructure, analysis or commentary, i.e. added value. Everyone will find out what happened, but they will be deprived of explanations of possible consequences. On the note of "added value," a good illustration is a recent survey conducted during an assembly debate on the Law on Value Added Tax, which is being introduced in Serbia. The surveyed citizens, residents of Belgrade, meaning bombarded with large amounts of media information from all sides, were unable to explain what VAT is, although news on its introduction dominated in the media.

I particularly noticed a lack of deeper analysis in the media when I was assigned to make a daily review of local press reports. Looking at the pile of daily papers on my desk, I felt the assignment would be extremely easy, but leafing through them showed completely the opposite. The idea of a review is to show something special and exclusive that daily papers offer to their readers. However, prevalent on their pages were news items, press releases and reports on press conferences. Even issues that deserved at least a little investigation and analysis were covered by reactions of those involved accompanying news items.

One cannot say that readers in Serbia are uninformed; quite the contrary, one would rather say they are too informed. But, they only register all this information; they acknowledge it, without any instructions on what this knowledge means to them. They are informed, they have heard of everything that is going on, but they do not know how it is related to them. That is why their reactions to news are relatively lukewarm. Certain media campaigns, however, have shown that civil awareness does exist in Serbia and that people are ready to react to the right impulse from the media. An example is a recent appeal by the Blood Transfusion Institute resulting in a considerable rise in the number of donors, but only after news on a critical shortage was accompanied by numerous stories on problems threatening as a result of this.

Commentary as a form is not unknown in the print media in Serbia. Quite the opposite. In daily papers, commentaries are regular and frequent. But, these are usually regular columnists presenting their opinions on various current issues, mostly political ones, based on their own reasoning and views, i.e. not a result of research or even inquiry.

The situation regarding commentaries on the issue of economy is a little better, since competent experts are hired for them, usually.

It is, therefore, not surprising that readers show most interest in obscure tabloids, which are always offering “something new.” Articles published in them not only exude sensationalism; they are on the verge of “non-science fiction” (often going beyond even that). Amazingly, readers support such editorial policies and are not willing to turn their backs on these papers even when they realize they have been fooled by them. For instance, it happened that a tabloid announced news on the arrest of Radovan Karadzic on its front page, without even minimal reservation due to possible lack of authenticity. Reactions by the usual “experts on the situation” followed the next day, and a day later the news of two days ago was completely denied, of course without any apology or any consequences.

The media space in Serbia is, thus, vast. But this is a space with a lot of repetition, namely with a lot of the same. Like a large supermarket whose many shelves are filled with large amounts of the same items, resembling a warehouse more than a shop. Hence the impression that Democratic Party candidate Boris Tadic in recent presidential elections was in a better position than his direct second-round competitor Tomislav Nikolic from the Serbian Radical Party. But, actually, Tadic’s team was producing more information than Nikolic’s, he had more public figures offering him support, and this was all reaching the media, where there was no particular filtration after that, as there is usually none.