

Serbian Media between Alternative Past and Future

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Politics and Media in Serbia

Last October marked the passing of six years since the collapse of Slobodan Milosevic's rule over Serbia. The fall of the Milosevic government was a precondition for other changes. It made it possible to abandon the politics that had created military conflicts, triggered ethnic cleansing and war crimes, and spread nationalistic feelings and hate speech, and which had involved regime control of a major part of the country's economy and media. The system that had been created during the previous decade had to be changed to make it possible to consider a European future of the country, reconciliation with the former Yugoslav republics, and economic and social renewal.

Yet now, six years later, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague has not yet been successfully concluded, even though it is one of the conditions the European Union has formulated for resuming interrupted negotiations about the Stabilisation and Association process. The status of Kosovo has not yet been solved. In 2006, Montenegro voted for independence. General political scepticism in the country is high. It is strengthened by political instability, especially since Zoran Djindjic, the first democratically elected, reformist Prime Minister, was assassinated in 2003. The murder trial is still in process, burdened with pressures and obstructions.¹ Radical political forces are on the rise², along with corruption and other scandals. Unemployment is high, and the standard of living is low. Although opinion polls show that support for EU membership is very high, the date of a possible formal entry of Serbia into the family of European nations is still very far off. Experience from the countries that joined the EU in 2004 shows that this support tends to decrease when the integration process starts tackling more controversial issues. Citizens of Serbia can barely travel to any European country without visas, and those are very difficult to obtain. The situation in politics and media is such that it discourages support for necessary reforms, which are often difficult and demanding, and moreover, are tightly linked to the process of European integration.

After the fall of the old regime, things had started to change in the media in Serbia as well, literally from the day after Milosevic's fall. Milivoje Calija, head of the marketing department of the independent radio and television station B92, recounts it as follows in *Talasanje Srbije* ('Serbia Waves')³, a book devoted to the history and present of this famous Serbian media outlet:

"The system in which everything had been clear was broken. In it, there had been an evil man whom everybody was fighting against, and there was us, some sort of resistance movement. When Milosevic was overthrown, many people were confused as to what they should be doing (...). As a listener, I saw B92 as a social movement, which had pursued a broader goal of promoting general values, not just of generating energy for a regime change. The events of October 5 were something I had been waiting for, and the period after that was to be one in which we would have to prove that we were something more than a movement".

In Serbia, during the Milosevic regime, the production of the media that was under regime control, in particular the state-owned media, was characterised by authoritarian propaganda permeating every segment and section of programming. Outside the control of the government, meanwhile, were what was generally called the alternative or independent media.

Internationally, there have been numerous attempts to define the scope of alternative media, and to give at least an approximate definition of them. Different authors usually agree that there is a diverse and sometimes even chaotic range of voices that speak in alternative sites, and that it is therefore difficult to organise alternative media into a recognisable or orderly structure. It is also said, convincingly, that it is important to look at the national and political context of each country's alternative media. If media oppose official discourse and try to change the status quo in a certain

community, they would belong in this category. One scholar in the study of alternative and community media, Chris Atton,⁴ tries to additionally make a clear defining distinction between the scope of 'radical' and 'alternative' media and looks for a model 'that privileges the transformative potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks.'

In Serbia, there were numerous discussions during the last decade about the meaning of 'independent journalism' and whether such a category existed at all, both in Serbia and globally. Those who supported the regime denied that there was any truly independent journalism, as the media outside of state control were in turn mainly supported by foreign foundations. However, even those who made up the oppositional media circles had problems deciding what would be the most precise term to define the media outside the regime control⁵.

The reach and influence of independent or alternative media in Serbia were rising throughout the decade before the fall of Milosevic, and so did the threats from the regime and the obstacles it put into place. In the period preceding the political changes, these media were considered one of the main pillars of democratisation. They are now trying to become commercially successful, with varied success.

The development in the media sphere in Serbia after October 2000 in part resembled the changes of the media in other transition countries, and partly was specific for the country. At first, all media supported the newly elected Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition, and covered both the reforms it carried out and the future of the country in general with optimism. However, this situation lasted for a rather short period, just like the unity of the winning coalition itself was short-lived. When DOS split, the media divided their loyalties among the different groups, mostly following either Djindjic, then Serbian Prime Minister, or Vojislav Kostunica, the president of the then still existing Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. There were few exceptions where media did try to remain objective.

There are clear suspicions, voiced by journalists and editors, that some media were under the influence of some political and even criminal circles⁶. Their agenda was to oppose the Djindjic government and its activities, which were very brave in some areas. It focused in particular on the government's economic policies and its cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, which included the arrest of Milosevic. The government, on its part, did not accomplish much in terms of regulating the chaotic situation in the media⁷ that had been inherited from the previous regime. Analyst Vladan Radosavljevic wrote⁸:

"There is no doubt that what characterises in the clearest way the state of the media sphere in Serbia this year and last year is the fact that the authorities have conspicuously avoided conducting any clear media policy and that the media and the public have been tolerating status quo."

Parliament did pass some laws that were designated to regulate the media domain, among them the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance⁹. However, their enforcement has been problematic¹⁰.

Referring to developments around the region, the IREX Media Sustainability Index for 2005 concluded¹¹:

"'Color' revolutions cannot be relied on to change the media landscape. While they certainly can bring positive changes, their main effect seems to be a temporary unleashing of the media and media advocates. But deeper professionalisation, legal and regulatory reform, and development of media businesses takes dedicated specialists."

Regarding Serbia, the collaborative study "Ethics and Journalism in Southeastern Europe"¹², arrived at an even more critical assessment:

"In Serbia, each of the 30 journalists who participated in our survey used almost exactly the same words to describe the state of journalism today as once used during the research conducted during 2003. The prevalent emotions were negative and epithets like bad, disastrous, degraded, humiliated, worse than ever were used."

In the post-2000 period, tabloids are the one kind of newspapers in Serbia that have grown rapidly – both in number and in political influence¹³.

Nacional was the first political tabloid in Serbia, but it was banned during the State of Emergency that was introduced after the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic. It was closed on the grounds that it had 'disrespected the regulations on information during the State of Emergency' and the 'presumption that its contributors or publishers were in contact with criminal groups.'¹⁴ But after the State of Emergency and up to the current day, numerous new tabloids have appeared, some of them realising large circulation numbers. These papers appeal mainly to the losers of the transition, those who have been left unsatisfied and disappointed. Their contents are political, but presented in a very light way, aimed at dramatising social and political events. Their rhetoric is aggressive, and they use language and photographs that go beyond public decency.

As far as readership of the press in general is concerned, according to the data of a Strategic Marketing poll from late 2005¹⁵ 42,9 percent of men and only 30,1 percent of women in Serbia read a newspaper every day. In total that number was 1,966,908 people. The poll for 2006, published in February 2007,¹⁶ has shown decrease in the total number of press readers – 1,904,870 people on average read daily papers. In Western Europe the percentage is significantly higher: According to the World Association of Newspapers (WAN)¹⁷ 62.1 percent of all European adults read a daily newspaper.

Internet Development and the New Media

Since the general situation of the Serbian media will not improve very quickly, it is worth considering the new media and new ways of reporting. In recent years, the largest growth of alternative media takes place online.

According to Dan Gillmor, the founder of the Center for Citizen Media and author of the book *We the Media* who is considered one of the most influential technology journalists and new media advocates, "the democratisation of the tools and the distribution of journalism – the idea that anyone can do it", could be defining features of the media for the time to come.

Globally, in a time of continuous strengthening of alternative online media, traditional and commercial media of all types can also not forego on presenting their contents on the Internet in ever more efficient, effective and innovative ways, increasingly creating contents and services exclusively for the Internet as well. They are experimenting ever more with the integration of user-created content, inviting readers to contribute their own eye-witness reports or footage, and using the opportunities of interactivity through blogs, portals and forums. Many of those services are created for purpose, but through and in addition to these platforms, connections to alternative media sites, blogs and services are also multiplying.

For now, online media still play a limited role in Serbia. Only approximately 24 percent of Serbian citizens have access to the Internet¹⁸. The Internet presence of print and broadcasting media is still underdeveloped. But there are also exceptions. Radio station B92 is the foremost one.

One of the interviewees in *Talasanje Srbije* put it this way, explaining his relation to B92 in the post-2000 period: "My B92 has moved to the Internet. In the past, we used to gather with friends and discuss the news, and now it is sufficient to click and see diverse comments to online news (...) The future of B92 has already started, and radio is not yet aware of that."

B92's Internet presence is however not representative of the general situation. B92 has the most visited website in Serbia¹⁹ and among the highest visit rates in the Balkans. Mainstream media are far behind, both in traffic and the attention they pay to their web presence.²⁰

B92 also looms large over the alternative media landscape, such as it is. While there are individual bloggers that deal in a skilled and attractive way with social and political issues, media, IT, and other buzz topics that are dominant in the alternative media around the world, there are no other well-known alternative online media. Websites that do provide a constant flow of information on current affairs or specific topics are usually projects of youth groups or NGOs, which either fail to promote themselves or are short-lived.

However, there does seem to be a growing interest in online media and the Internet in general in recent months, which promises possible changes in the near future.

There is definitely a need and a use for more high-quality online content related to culture, the environment, local communities, marginal groups, new technologies and other topics that are underrepresented in traditional and commercial media. Considering the slow reform and lack of pluralism of the mainstream media and the lack of ambitious investigative reporting in them, online media could fill a gap in providing an opportunity to present views and information that are now not heard or aired.

Through the new media, that are easier to establish and run than print and broadcasting media and require relatively little start-up capital, it would be possible to promote other concepts of community, responsibility, professional ethics, and journalistic styles. In these new media, journalists and editors could be freer to report critically and ethically and explore alternative angles than they are in the big media outlets, burdened as those are by political and financial debts, loyalties and investments. The new media endeavours could prove a useful impulse for all branches of the media, the body politic and the public itself.

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- ¹ Aleksandar Roknić, "Mrcvarenje pravde" *Danas*, 9 September 2006, <http://www.danas.co.yu/20060909/vikend2.html>. Roknić writes about a number of pressures: the change of government in 2004 at first brought announcements that the Special Court for Organized Crime would be closed, the head of the judicial council resigned, there was the death of a protected witness, and various speculations in tabloids. See also: Aleksandar Roknić, "Serbia: Judge's Departure Shakes Djindjic Trial", *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 12 September 2006, http://iwpr.net/?p=brn&s=f&o=323818&apc_state=henbrn.
- ² Nationalists gained the most votes in the parliamentary elections in January 2007, see: EurActiv, "Ultras win Serbian election", *EurActiv.com*, 22 January 2007, <http://www.euractiv.com/en/elections/ultras-win-serbian-election/article-161062>
- ³ Masic, Dusan, *Talasanje Srbije – Knjiga o radiju B92*, Belgrade, Samizdat B92, 2006 (in Serbian)
- ⁴ Atton, Chris, *Approaching Alternative Media: Theory and Methodology*, session paper for the ICA Preconference "Our Media, Not Theirs", Washington DC, May 24 2001. See <http://www.ourmedianet.org/papers/om2001/Atton.om2001.pdf>
- ⁵ Sekulic, Isidora : "Media Resistance Movement of the 1990s" (an interview with Rade Veljanovski, the editor of the daily *Danas*), *Media - Pravo na Sliku i Rec/ Media - The right to Pictures and Words* (bilingual monthly), No.27, Belgrade, December 1997
- ⁶ The B92 TV program 'Insajder' provides regular information on the topic of what journalists think about their colleagues and their profession in present-day Serbia, see <http://www.b92.net/info/emisije/insajder.php>
- ⁷ See the open letter that editors-in-chief and media experts wrote in 2003 about the overall media situation in the country at the moment: *Media in Serbia*, <http://www.b92.net/english/special/rds/media.php>
- ⁸ Vladan Radosavljevic, "Pressure on Media in Serbia: Between Black and White", *Southeast European Media Journal*, 18 February 2002, <http://mediaonline.ba/en/?ID=194>
- ⁹ Guide through the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance published by the Commissioner for information of public importance, http://www.poverenik.org.yu/Dokumentacija/eng_22_ldok.pdf
- ¹⁰ Report about the implementation of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance in 2006, submitted by the Commissioner for information of public importance to the National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia, http://www.poverenik.org.yu/vesti_eng.asp?ID=291
- ¹¹ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Europe and Eurasia 2005*, Executive Summary, http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/2005/summary.asp
- ¹² *Ethics and Journalism in South Eastern Europe*, Media Center, Belgrade, 2005, http://www.seenpm.org/download.php?file=Ethics_and_Journalism.pdf. *Ethics and..* was a regional research initiated by the Media Center in Belgrade, and implemented in cooperation with similar institutions in the region and the South-East European Network for the Professionalization of the Media (SEENPM).
- ¹³ Medija centar Beograd, "Being a Tabloid Should Not Exclude Professional Standards", *One World Southeast Europe*, 27 September 2004, <http://see.oneworld.net/article/view/94787/1>; Jovanka Matic, "Problems Facing Quality Press Development in Serbia", in Orlin Spassov (Ed.), *Quality Press in Southeast Europe*, Sofia, SOEMZ, 2004, <http://soemz.euv-frankfurt-o.de/media-see/qpress/articles/jmatic.html>
- ¹⁴ Politika, March 20, 2003
- ¹⁵ Strategic Marketing, *PrintAdex Annual Report 2005*, <http://www.smmri.co.yu/code/navigate.asp?Id=55>
- ¹⁶ Strategic Marketing, *PrintAdex Annual Report 2006*, <http://www.smmri.co.yu/code/navigate.asp?Id=66>
- ¹⁷ World Association of Newspapers, "World Press Trends: On Circulation", *World Press Trends: Newspaper Growth Continues*, 2001, <http://www.wan-press.org/ce/previous/2001/congress.forum/wpt/circulation.html>
- ¹⁸ Centre for Research of Information Technologies (CePIT), *24% of Internet users in Serbia - CePIT's research*, 2006, http://www.bos.org.yu/cepit/eng/news/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1161087555&archive=&start_from=&ucat=80&
- ¹⁹ For current data, see B92, *Traffic*, <http://www.b92.net/eng/marketing/clients.php>

²⁰ The B92 website includes constantly updated news, specialized sections (business, technology, culture, lifestyle, cars, sports) and a number of interactive features such as: Blog, forum, newsletter, RSS, podcast, wap and palm services. For more about the B92 web site and the company's converged content strategy, see: David Brewer, "A Content Production Revolution", *Poynter Online*, 12 May 2004, http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=65159