



Transitional Justice and the Role of the Media in the Balkans

Discussion Paper

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Analysis and reflection on the impact of the media's reporting, both during and since the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, has been starkly limited within the transitional justice context. To be fair, there is little dedicated focus in other regions of the world on positive examples where journalists and the media have challenged official tolerance for serious human rights violations, including war crimes. However, in the case of the Balkans, the ongoing lack of discussion about the constructive potential of the media's role in transitional justice efforts is complicated by a series of factors, not least of which is the former Yugoslavia's communist past and widely divergent attitudes about the conflict itself. This brief discussion paper explores these issues with a view to promoting further debate and reflection.

What is the relationship between media and transitional justice, and is the Balkan experience distinct in any sense? It is obvious that print media, radio and television may either aid the processes of truth seeking and reconciliation, or be a major obstacle on that path. Numerous works have been written on the second topic, ranging from discussion of Nazi propaganda to the role of the media in the Rwandan genocide; however, analyses of positive examples are starkly lacking. In former Yugoslavia, before, during, and after the wars of the 1990's, media took on both positive and negative roles. Because the destructive influence of negative media is much more obvious, it has received most of the attention.

This paper will try to bridge that gap by providing positive examples of media's role in contributing to public debates about facing the past and accountability for committed war crimes. The first part of the paper will examine the role of state-controlled media before and during the war in the former Yugoslavia, and contrast that with positive examples of the work of independent media, particularly in reporting on crimes committed during the war. The second part of the paper will bring attention to positive examples of regional media collaboration, and will provide evidence of why such cooperation is necessary for enhancing transitional justice issues. Finally, the paper will examine the challenges independent media encountered in the past as well as today, and consider media's potential for undoing and combating the damage wrought by the conflict in the Balkans.

In the former Yugoslavia, even the act of describing the conflict during the 1990s remains contentious. The Croats call it the 'Homeland War' and celebrate it as a war of

independence. In neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, it really depends on where you ask the question. In the Republic of Srpska, for instance, the official narrative is that the conflict was a civil war, while in the Federation¹ the same conflict is commonly understood as a foreign act of aggression, although some are quick to add that numerous battles were led on religious grounds. For many years, authorities of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro² bluntly claimed that their country was not involved in any war, and held to that position until bombs started falling from the sky. At that moment, the official language immediately changed to Serbia's proclamation of war against NATO. At exactly the same time and place, Kosovo Albanians claimed to be leading a liberation war, whereas the countries of the NATO Alliance referred to the bombarding of Serbia and Kosovo as a 'humanitarian intervention,' essentially obscuring the war's destructive meaning. Throughout this period, in the struggle to grasp what was going on, members of the foreign press—driven by tight deadlines and a penchant for simplicity when presenting news—often depicted the wars resulting from the dismantlement of the former Yugoslavia by using the time-worn metaphor of the 'Balkan powder keg.' Even today, more than 15 years after this once prosperous state began to unravel, there is very little consensus among the former republics on official narratives about what actually happened, let alone more systematic approaches to facing their own roles in the conflict.

Truth is usually one of the first casualties of war and the media's role in fueling the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia has yet to be fully examined. As direct descendents of the communist press—which had a 'special social and political mission'

¹ The country of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities, the Federation where the majority of the population are Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republic of Srpska where Serbs are the majority population

² At that time, the country was the sole remaining successor state to the former Yugoslavia. Today they are two separate countries, respectively the Republic of Serbia and Republic of Montenegro

in protecting the political system—on the eve of the conflict, state-owned media in the former Yugoslavia simply changed its tune. It replaced its “dying socialist terminology” with a “the language of demagogy, neck-breaking irrationality, rhetorical questions and cries, fate and god-sent messages and roles” as aptly stated by British journalist and Balkan expert, Mark Thompson.³

Looking back, it is possible to differentiate two stages in which the media inspired, and later perpetuated, the conflict. By focusing on the differences rather than the similarities between former brothers and neighbors, most of the regional media was unified in demonizing the ‘other.’ The old, unsettled issues from the past were resurrected in the public sphere, and the Kosovo battle,⁴ Jasenovac,⁵ Blajburg⁶ and atrocities committed in Bosnia during WWII were constantly referred to in the media. When the war started in 1991, the most powerful media outlets diverted their work almost exclusively to propaganda activities. Fabricating news was seen as a ‘patriotic duty’ and an activity of ‘national interest.’ At the same time, in many places affected by the conflict a war censorship was in force. Journalists who found it impossible to work under such circumstances often resigned or were forced to leave their jobs. According to the estimates of the independent syndicate of *Radio-Television Serbia* (RTS), in the first two years of the conflict, some 1,300 journalists and technicians left or were expelled

³ Mark Thompson, *Proizvodnja Rata: Mediji u Srbiji, Hrvatskoj i Bosni i Hercegovini*, drugo dopunjeno izdanje, Medija centar i Free b92, Beograd 2000 Quotations according to <http://balkansnet.org/biserko.html>

⁴ This was the battle between Serbs and Ottoman Turks which took place at the field of Kosovo in 1389, and it is considered by many Serbs to be a defending point in the Serbian history

⁵ During World War II Jasenovac was a concentration camp in Croatia where the majority of victims were Serbs

⁶ At the end of the World War II, near the Blajburg village Partisan forces killed number of opposing soldiers who were mostly Croats

from this media outlet alone.⁷ In his writings, Croatian journalist Pero Jurišin claims that 600 journalists⁸ were fired from Croatian state television for not being ‘ideologically reliable’ for the job. Similar casting off was happening in many other smaller media outlets throughout the former Yugoslavia. Those who stayed in the state outlets complied and the following years are often described as ‘the dark ages’ of the media in the Balkans or, in the words of Mirko Klarin, director of the *SENSE* agency, “Media in former Yugoslavia were like nuclear reactors manufacturing hate, prejudice, and especially fear.”⁹

I. The Light Keepers

There were, however, journalists determined to report the truth regardless of the consequences. These ‘light keepers’ aimed their focus beyond what was happening on the front lines. For them, the idea of balanced reporting necessitated—among other things—raising awareness about war crimes committed by their own compatriots. Since the television stations with national reach were tightly controlled by the regimes, and the local independents were never operational for longer periods of time, the public was primarily informed through radio programs. It should be noted that Belgrade’s *Radio B-92*, Zagreb’s *Radio 101*, and to some extent Sarajevo’s *Radio Zid* not only continuously reported unbiased information rather than state propaganda, but also played a significant role in assembling people in political and civic disobedience in opposition to the war.

⁷ The numbers are according to Milica Pešić, Executive Director of the Media Diversity Institute from London who was at the time a member of the executive board of the Independent syndicate of Radio-Television Serbia, interviewed by the author on July 30 2007

⁸ Pero Jurišin, Čast profesije/ The Honor of the Profession; Pravda u Tranziciji/Justice in Transition, Issue No 9, April 2007, available at <http://www.pravdautranziciji.com/pages/article.php?id=1690>

⁹ Mirko Klarin, Preispitati kriminalnu prošlost medija/ Criminal Past of Media Should be Examined, Danas, May 16 2006, available at <http://www.danas.co.yu/20060516/hronika1.html>

After the war, it was usually these same outlets which started separate programs focused almost exclusively on addressing the contentious issues from the past. Weekly programs such as ‘Catharsis’ on *Radio-B92*, ‘The Truth, Responsibility, and Reconciliation’ at *TV B-92*, ‘Crime and Punishment’ on *Radio 101*, and later ‘Latinica’ at *HRT 1* were and still are among the leading sources reminding the general public and the authorities that all war crimes need to be acknowledged, and all perpetrators, regardless of their ethnicity or war decorations, need to be held accountable.

The investigative reporting which was in its early stages in communist Yugoslavia, fully blossomed on the pages of independent print media during the conflict. The weekly magazine *Vreme*, and the daily *Danas* (formerly *Naša Borba*) were among the rare Serbian media outlets that reported about the destruction of Dubrovnik, the siege of Sarajevo, atrocities in Srebrenica and Foča, and the massacres of the Kosovo Albanians. The Montenegrin magazine, *Monitor*, was known to be even more harsh in its writings than its Serbian counterparts, for which its press office suffered several bomb attacks. Certain notable investigative reporting done by the Croatian press included topics covered by the weekly *Feral Tribune*, *Arkzin*, and the daily *Novi List*, such as civilians killed in Gospić, Paulin Dvor, Sisak, and Osijek. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the magazines *Dani* (formerly *Naši Dani*) and *Slobodna Bosna*, as well as the daily *Oslobodjenje*, opened public discussions about atrocities committed by the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the conflict, including the killing of Croatian civilians in Grabovica, and the fates of Serbian families in Sarajevo during the siege. They were also the first to expose some decorated Bosnian heroes as war criminals. Among Albanian media from Kosovo, examples of early media democratization include the daily *Koha*

Ditore, on whose pages Serbian political leaders were free to express their views during the conflict, and an underground internet project for broad and balanced information that eventually became *Radio TV 21*.

Unfortunately, some independent journalists paid a high price for swimming against the tide. After publishing a story in 1999 about the executions of Bosniaks in Prijedor, Željko Kopanja the editor-in-chief of Republic of Srpska's first independent magazine *Nezavisne Novine*, lost both of his legs in an attempt on his life. Threats to journalists exposing past crimes continues even today, more than ten years after the conflict. In 2005, after writing about the Glavaš case, Drago Hedl of the *Feral Tribune* received repeated threats, while Dejan Anastasijević of *Vreme* magazine was attacked in early 2007, after the numerous threats he had received since October 2002, when he testified in The Hague at the trial of Slobodan Milošević. In 'anti-Hague circles' in Serbia, Anastasijević is stigmatized as a 'Serbian traitor'

II. The Necessity for Cooperation

Since state-controlled media during the conflict routinely reported about misdeeds of the 'Serbo-Chetniks,' 'Resurrected Ustashas,' and 'Mujahedins,' the cooperation of independent media was crucial in preventing the people of the former Yugoslavia from being entirely manipulated by distorted information. One of the first, best, and longest-running media projects was the *Alternative Information Network* (AIM) which, for ten years (from 1992-2002), was a place to exchange articles and obtain impartial information about developments from the region, and was widely used by independent and international press. *AIM* had offices in all the Balkan capitals, including Kosovo, and

its goal was, in the words of its coordinator Dragica Mugoša, “breaking the uniform picture of the enemy and cycle of hate.”¹⁰

Somewhat similar at the time was the work of the *Institute for War and Peace Reporting* (IWPR) which today runs a specialized program on the web called ‘Monitoring International Justice,’ that provides information about the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY.) Created out of the *IWPR*’s program for the Balkans, the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* (BIRN) is also an excellent example of current media cooperation in the region. Today, this type of cooperation is less about spreading accurate information across borders than it is about raising awareness around events that occurred in the past. As Velimir Ćurguz Kazimir, the director of media documentation Ebart, has aptly noted, “failing to raise a voice about the committed crime, is as if the crime never happened.”¹¹

BIRN is exceptional in that it has an individual focus on each country in the region. In Bosnia, it publishes a weekly edition called the ‘Justice Report,’ focused on explaining the work of the Bosnian War Crimes Chamber. For the Kosovo public, there is a TV co-production called ‘Life in Kosovo,’ which runs weekly on *RTK* (Radio Television Kosovo) and raises issues related to the work of the government, Kosovo’s non-Albanian communities, and the ICTY trials. In Serbia, the current focus is on providing minority trainings for journalists.

Censorship and pressure on the media has also influenced the way information spreads. Given that authorities in all the countries affected by the conflict have done their

¹⁰ Dragica Mugoša, All Independent media on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia Publish AIM Articles, by Stojan Obradović, *Bumerang*, Osijek, Croatia, July 9 1995, available at <http://www.ex-yupress.com/bumerang/bumerang1.html>

¹¹ Velimir Ćurguz Kazimir, *Zločin i javnost/ Crime and Public, Pravda u Tranziciji/ Justice in Transition* Issue No 1, October 2005, available at <http://www.pravdautranziciji.com/pages/article.php?id=58>

best to stop the free flow of information, independent journalists and their public have been forced to engage in some creative ventures. *Domovina.net*—which in just two years became the first elaborate Web portal for exchanging news from the region—started in 1993 in the Amsterdam apartment of Dutchman Frank Tiggelarr. In 1997, *Domovina.net*, which is still entirely run by volunteers, was the first to broadcast live streaming from the ICTY, and many journalists from the former Yugoslavia used their feeds. One of the latest Web initiatives following in the footsteps of *Domovina.Net*, as well as *ZaMir*, *FREE Serbia*, and *OneWorld SEE* to name just a few, is *NET Novinar*. This joint project of the Sarajevo Media Center and the Center for Investigative Journalism in Zagreb has an entire section dedicated to war crimes. It contains publications and articles written by experienced journalists on an array of topics, including the types of skills and techniques required when reporting on war crimes trials, updates on the latest legislation, and a calendar of events for the entire region related to war crimes. Similar in terms of content is *Pravda u Tranziciji*, the first journal from the former Yugoslavia that is entirely dedicated to educating opinion-makers and the general public on the necessity of facing past crimes. The journal is published by the War Crimes Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Serbia, and has regular sections such as, ‘Ways toward Justice,’ ‘The Tribunal in The Hague,’ and ‘Media and Crime.’ Finally, there is *SENSE* (South East News Service Europe), founded in 1998 entirely focused on covering the trials before the ICTY, International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC). One of their main activities is to produce weekly television programs, which can then be used by stations from the region without a live presence in The Hague.

Such regional partnerships offer useful models for the ways in which future media outlets may approach topics of the past, and highlight a multitude of incentives for cooperation. In communist Yugoslavia, the truths about past crimes were never publicly revealed in full and the most common source of knowledge about history was memory, which is often unreliable or premised on mythology. Thus, it seems obvious that one of the main tasks of present media is to attempt to paint comprehensive narratives about past atrocities, to tell stories that include everybody, regardless of his or her ethnicity or current residency. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the war happened in a shared space. As Iva Vukušić, a reporter from *Radio 101* has rightly commented, “We cannot explore any of the wars in an isolated manner, detached from the region in which they occurred. Since the wars and the war crimes did not happen in isolation, it is essential for the reporting on war crimes to be regional.”¹²

There is also the important issue of acknowledging ‘the other’. When reporting about past crimes, today’s mainstream media across the spectrum focuses almost exclusively on the sufferings of its compatriots, reinforcing a sense of competing victimization. According to a public survey conducted by ‘Documenta’ in 2006,¹³ slightly more than half of the Croats they interviewed expressed the belief that the Croats were the only victims of the past war and that Croatian casualties were higher than those of the other ethnicities. In that respect, a regionalized media approach may help to ensure a less distorted picture about what really happened and may significantly help the general public to snap out of its denial concerning crimes committed on their behalf. At

¹² Interviewed by the author on July 29 2007

¹³ Documenta, 2006 public survey, Facing the Past , summary of the survey available at <http://www.documenta.hr/dokumenti/istrazivanje.pdf>

the same time, raising awareness about developments in transitional justice in neighboring countries can stimulate elements important for the healing of victims, particularly in the case of reporting on perpetrators' acknowledgement of guilt or expressions of remorse. Lastly, what has happened in the past is, in a way, a shared legacy. Perpetrators, witnesses, commanders, and victims exist on all sides, and reporting about some of them can trigger reactions across borders. This was the case of Slobodan Davidović arrested in Croatia after segments of the local population recognized him following a broadcast of the 'Scorpions' video.

III. Beyond Traditional Journalism

If the impact of images could be expressed in seismological terms, it would be safe to say that the broadcast of the 'Scorpions' provoked a shock throughout former Yugoslav societies as strong as an earthquake of devastating magnitude. The power of the unedited video images capturing the execution of unarmed civilians by Serbian Forces—the 'Scorpions'—was so strong that, in the days after the broadcast, the Serbian public shifted from a state of denial toward a recognition that the massacre in Srebrenica had indeed happened. Similarly, the video provoked a chain reaction in the media. In the 30 months prior to the video broadcast, the Serbian press had published 1,492 articles in relation to Srebrenica; in just three weeks following the broadcast, an additional 676 articles came out.¹⁴

This was not by any means the only time the citizens of the former Yugoslavia were influenced by the power of pictures. The war that would break apart the country was

¹⁴ According to the Ebart Media Documentation survey from 2005 titled 'Serbian Media about Srebrenica 1/1 2003 – 6/24/2005' page 3, available <http://www.arhiv.co.yu/pdf/Srebrenica.pdf>

in a way foreshadowed by audio and video tapes showing Martin Špegelj, the Croatian defense minister at the time, acquiring weapons on the black market. In preparation for the war, documentary images that depicted historical atrocities among different ethnic groups in Yugoslavia were routinely broadcast on national televisions. Yet, it is also interesting to observe that documentary images have catalyzed judicial bodies into action. Last year, *TV B-92* broadcast video material depicting the harassment and murders of Serbian civilians by the Croatian paramilitary forces ‘Crne mambe’ as well as members of the Bosnian forces ‘Hamze’ during operation ‘Storm.’ The immediate consequence was that the War Crimes Prosecutors’ Offices in both Croatia and Bosnia opened investigations based on that footage.

There are other notable examples of documentary films raising awareness of past crimes. The *Saga* production in Bosnia, the Croatian *Factum*, and Serbia’s *B-92*, to name only the largest, have to date dealt with a wide range of contentious issues from the past. The documentary film, *Vukovar-Final Cut*, presents an important landmark for being the first Serbo-Croatian co-production on the subject of facing the past. Produced in 2006 by *B-92*, this documentary represents an effort to create a truthful story about the 1991 events that happened in the Croatian town of Vukovar. There is also an example of proactive usage of video in reinforcing the process of reconciliation: *Videoletters* is an ongoing Dutch project using the format of a video letter in reconnecting former colleagues, neighbors, and friends who were on opposing sides during the war. Many video letters have been broadcast on TV stations across the region, often inspiring a vibrant debate.

When discussing ways to bridge ethnic boundaries and raise awareness about the need to confront past crimes—as well as the need to initiate broader discussions within society as a whole—the role of new technologies such as chat rooms, forums, news comments, blogs, and vlogs should also be further examined. As an open source, the internet enables its users to not only express their opinions in an uncensored fashion, but also provides a place for creating a public record. In this way, investigative reporting can go a step further. On blogs dedicated to war crimes—such as the ones written by Croatian journalist Željko Peratović and Bosnian journalist and scholar Neven Andjelić—visitors can not only find articles and opinions from different sources, related documents, and photos, they can also engage in the polemics as well. On the flip side, journalists interested in covering a topic can use internet tools for further exploration. Some of the widely read discussion lists and blogs dedicated to the Balkans and transitional justice issues are *International Justice Watch Discussion List*, *East Ethnia*, and *Neretva River*.

IV. Past and Present Challenges

The recent public opinion poll entitled, ‘Journalists and Journalism in the Eyes of Serbian People and Media’ revealed some disturbing facts about the perceived state of the profession.¹⁵ Only 20 percent of those interviewed perceive Serbian journalism to be objective, and only 30 percent think that it ‘addresses relevant topics.’ Furthermore, when asked about favorable professions for their children, only four percent answered that they would like their son or daughter to become a journalist. Such a grim picture is not

¹⁵ Novinari i novinarstvo u očima građana i novinara Srbije/ Journalists and Journalism in the eyes of Serbian People and Media, Survey done by Strategic Marketing Research, 2007, available at http://www.b92.net/info/dokumenti/index.php?nav_id=256605

without reason. The majority of media in the former Yugoslavia is still in a transitional phase and some of the challenges that journalists commonly face include the rapid ‘tabloidization’ of the press, curtails on independence, and an unsupportive public. Throughout the region, journalists are largely unable to pursue their professional interests in transitional justice issues precisely because these topics don’t sell magazines. What drives the news and sells newspapers these days are stories about celebrities, sensations, and often fabricated scandals, which together leave little room for serious, investigative reporting. Another common obstacle in determining if a story will or will not be published relates to the question of how much the media are truly free in transitional societies. Most of the media in the region are still financially and operationally dependent on the interests of politicians, big advertisers, the donor community, and, in some cases, even the local mafia.

Finally, a common challenge shared by most of the media of the former Yugoslavia relates to the general public’s expectations. During one of her first interviews after becoming the President of the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, Nadežda Gaće was asked why the national press covered only a few stories about confronting past crimes. She answered that, “People generally do not want to be reminded of bad things. For many of them, these are similar to showing a red scarf to a bull.”¹⁶ At the other extreme, in Croatia there is still a widely-shared feeling that the war was a justified state-forming struggle. In 2000, the Croatian Government passed the ‘Declaration on the Patriotic War,’ which makes reporting about any war crimes committed by Croats prohibitively difficult.

¹⁶ Nadežda Gaće, *Novinari u ogledalu/ Journalists in a Mirror, Pravda u Tranziciji/ Justice in Transition*, Issue No 4, April 2006, available at <http://www.pravdautranziciji.com/pages/article.php?id=1020>

Despite the many obstacles and an often indifferent or hostile public, the independent media in the former Yugoslavia have been crucial to initiating public debate about important issues, such as confronting the past and revealing war crimes. It is interesting, however, to compare how reporting about transitional justice issues has changed over time. These changes are in part a result of changed circumstances and environment, but also relate to the development of the issues themselves.

During the war, evidence and testimony by witnesses and survivors was the main focus of the story. At that time, it was terribly important to give voices to victims, as was well observed by George Papagiannis of *IREX* who said that, “genocide is about silencing people. So, when you give someone a microphone and ask them to tell you something, it is like giving them something back.”¹⁷ Today, focusing solely on individual stories is not enough; these stories need to be situated and examined as part of a broader social context. According to Nidžara Ahmetašević, editor of *BIRN*'s ‘Justice Report,’ journalists should be aware of the influence these broader types of stories can have on other victims as well as on the general public, since “they can make an impact on our surroundings and even bring some changes into society.”¹⁸ It should also be noted that in the past, the primary focus was given to reporting on committed war crimes. In the present, most reporting focuses on the war crimes trials. Thus, in order to report professionally, journalists today need to have a basic understanding of international law and the work of the tribunals.

¹⁷ George Papagiannis, *The Role of Local Media: Community Building and Trust*, Yll Bajraktari and Christina Parajon, United States Institute for Peace, July 2007 available at http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2007/0705_media_conflict.html#top

¹⁸ Nidžara Ahmetašević, *Izveštavanje o žrtvama rata: kako izgraditi povjerenje/ Reporting About War Victims: Towards Trust Building*, Net.Novinar/ Net.Journalist, July 25, 2007 available at http://www.netnovinar.org/netnovinar/dsp_page.cfm?articleid=9339&urlsectionid=3012&specialsection=ART_FULL&pageid=1318&PSID=24084

During the conflict, one of the greatest challenges to reporting on war crimes was connected to deciding who would take the risk to publish the story. As seen already, independent media were courageous enough to do so, but this often meant that the information was published in a press with modest circulation, or broadcast on a radio station with only a limited local range. Sometimes it was easier to report about war crimes in foreign media that had services in local languages, such as *Radio Free Europe*, *BBC*, *Voice of America*, or *Deutsche Welle*, since broadcasting there usually meant reaching a larger audience. Today, reports about war crimes have their place even in mainstream media. However, the largest outlets are still not committed to following these issues systematically. They usually report on the most important cases and often wait for smaller independent outlets to break the news first. When it comes to the interests of the international press, it is safe to say that the countries of the former Yugoslavia have fallen off the radar screen. With some notable exceptions, reporting from and about the Balkans today is on the periphery of world news.

As absurd as it may sound, reporting on crimes committed during the war was sometimes presented as reports about victories during the conflict. Croatian journalist Goran Flauder has noted that, “Reporting about ‘our’ war crimes was translated as reporting about war triumphs. It was not unusual to see a murderer of Serbian civilians, who was as such mentioned in media, parading the streets as a war hero, while the journalists who were writing about the same events as a violation of international conventions were at first perceived as if coming from another planet.”¹⁹ In the media

¹⁹ Goran Flauder, *Kako pisati o ratnim zločinima/ How to Report About War Crimes*, Net. Novinar/ Net.Journalist, October 09, 2006, available at http://www.netnovinar.org/netnovinar/dsp_page.cfm?pageid=1318&articleid=8475&urlsectionid=1375&specialsection=ART_FULL

today, there is an obvious distinction between heroism and crime. Both journalists and the general public are now better educated about issues such as universal human rights, the Geneva conventions, and responsibility up the chain of command. However, even when the general public is aware of a particular war crime story, it is often still perceived as an isolated incident. Hence, a systematic approach in reporting, as well as the more regular circulation of these topics in the public sphere, seems essential for a society to be able to face its past crimes.

During the conflict, journalists not only risked their lives reporting about war crimes, they also faced serious threats from the state meant to obstruct and punish their actions. These included bogus lawsuits and high penalties for independent news gathering and dissemination with the aim of financially draining a publishing agency; draconian information laws that were impossible to follow; high printing prices; and widely inaccessible distribution networks. Nowadays the situation is much better but, as discussed earlier, reporting about war crimes can still be dangerous. An additional problem is that in many places in the former Yugoslavia proper media legislation is not in place and lustration never occurred. As long as political and public spheres are occupied by those who are personally connected to the war, it is unlikely that a full dialogue about the past can be achieved.

Finally, there is the question about the role of journalists in the process of facing past crimes. What is the relevant importance of reporting on war crimes trials and how do journalists see their relationship to broader truth-telling processes? During the war, many found themselves in the awkward position of being perceived as a replacement of the political opposition and sometimes their work was seen as a supplement for necessary

political action. Many leading independent journalists repeatedly described their engagement as a life mission, rather than simply a media job. They talked about having a sense of morality, decency, and responsibility and not just about the needs of chasing the news. Perhaps Miroslav Filipović—a journalist from Serbia who was imprisoned during the war because of his writings—best encapsulates the role of journalists within the transitional context:

Journalists who write about war crimes can be divided into two groups. A minority, who report about war crimes committed by their compatriots and a significantly larger majority focused on crimes committed on their compatriots. I belong to the first group. This is not because there were no crimes committed against ‘my people,’ but because I believe the duty of a journalist is to make his own society better and more humane. You should clean up your own mess, before starting to point fingers at others.²⁰

With this in mind, it seems that the name one gives to the former Yugoslav conflict is in fact not that important. What matters is to publicly reveal what has happened so that the victims may continue with their lives and societies may ensure such grave mistakes are never repeated. This is certainly a process that calls for the engagement of political elites, opinion makers, legislators, and members of the third sector; a process that will eventually call for the mobilization of entire societies. Experiences from other contexts and places indicate that this will indeed be a journey of a thousand miles, but even the longest venture begins with a first step. Luckily, in the case

²⁰ Miroslav Filipović, Čišćenje svog dvorišta/Cleaning Your Own Mess First, Net.Novinar/Net.Journalist, October 22, 2006, available at http://www.netnovinar.org/netnovinar/dsp_page.cfm?articleid=8696&urlsectionid=3007&specialsection=ART_FULL&pageid=1318&PSID=21740

of the former Yugoslavia, members of the independent media, together with local NGOs, have already begun this process, although further discussion and collaborative thinking will be needed to continue the search for accountability and justice. It remains to be seen exactly who will take that crucial next step.

Web based Initiatives and Media

BIRN <http://www.birn.eu.com/>

Domovina.Net <http://www.domovina.net/index.php>

Net.Novinar <http://www.netnovinar.org/netnovinar/compiled/p1317.htm>

Pravda u Tranziciji <http://www.pravdautranziciji.com/>

SENSE <http://www.sense-agency.com/>

Videoletters <http://www.videoletters.org/>

Zeljko Peratovic <http://www.peratovic.net/index.html>

Neven Andjelic <http://blog.b92.net/arhiva/blog/5557>

International Justice Watch Discussion List
<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/archives/justwatch-1.html>

East Ethnia <http://eastethnia.blogspot.com/>

Neretva River <http://neretvariver.blogspot.com/>