
Elections in Croatia

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**Media Principles for Covering Elections in Croatia
(1995 – 1999)**

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Summary

This essay presents an analysis of the system of coverage of election activities in public media during the period from 1995 to 1999.

The analysis has shown that the system has been continuously developed in a democratic atmosphere, and that the campaign and its presentation in public media is becoming more reasonable, more tolerant and, from the journalistic point of view, more professional than it used to be 4 years ago, when the political public and our journalism started to sit for exam of a democratic political dialogue through the interfacing of parties and candidates in the elections.

As an evidence for this thesis, positive documents of The Croatian Radio-and-Television and The Croatian Journalist Association have been presented, revealing the development of the journalistic coverage of the elections in Croatia towards a more objective, more tolerant and more argued one from year to year, and the political dialogue of parties and their candidates towards a more civilized one.

On the basis of this analysis of all models of coverage of pre-election activities in Croatia (commercial, national and public television) the author has concluded that, starting from their experience, it is necessary to develop a model of representative responsible television and other public media, because the very concept of “public media” is not operable, nor is it possible to scientifically discover the entity who could objectively represent the category of the public, or manage the public media to the satisfaction of all concerned.

The media report on, discover and explain all events in everyday life, including pre-election activities of parties and individual candidates. From the political, scientific and moral point of view there emerges a question whether the existing coverage of elections in Croatia is optimal or insufficient, whether it meets high quality standards or not, and the most important of all, how to create a better media policy to improve that coverage.

Generally, ways and methods of covering pre-election activities are in the function of the basic models of media establishment. A comparative analysis shows that there are several ways to cover pre-election activities, through:

- commercial television
- national television
- public television and
- representative covering of elections.

Commercial television mostly covers the electoral area, as well as the advertising of market goods in general. Namely, each interested party and individual candidate can order promotional services and pay certain amounts of money for them. As for the actual spot design, it is based on the mutual cooperation of the users and providers of the services. The entire direction technology of pre-election spots comprises the professional work of designers, directors of spots, while the contents of the spots are more influenced by those who order them, that is, their advertising teams who are responsible for the conducting and designing of all parties' and candidates' appearances. Since everybody is in a way politically committed, so is commercial television, and it often gives sponsorship benefits to individual parties and candidates who express the political will of the sponsored party and their candidates.

Commercial television, thus, has no special policy towards systematic coverage of the totality of pre-election activities, and consequently, some parties and their activities do not appear in the programs at all, while the buyers of their services are presented according to the following principle: pay more – get more, and not only in spot duration, but also in the way of presentation. Such presentations extend from ordinary news-flashes to deluxe multimedia techniques, with the purpose to turn advertising into a spectacle. In addition to this, they use a variety of dynamic visuality possibilities. By using film editing and directing techniques, by inserting miscellaneous illustrative picture and sound materials, they intend to increase the degree of surprise and fascination of the electoral body. That is why both sides (the media and the users) began to think that the elections are won exclusively on account of lavishly directed programs and shows, especially those on television, because television is capable of lasering basic spots synergically to such an extent that it becomes inevitable for viewers to receive them, even if they do not give preference to the advertised party or individuals.

Because television is directed to success at any cost, television coverage of pre-election activities is the least objective or fair of all. Since the only fact that matters is who pays more, commercial television is necessarily the least fair, because it behaves in a sophistic way: those who pay more, have better designed and more effective spots, while those who can not afford it, get political spots without the appropriate TV decor, or, at worst, the spots are not even allowed to enter the TV broadcasting network, regardless of the supremacy of their message over other, better paid spots. In one word, commercial television has no mercy, even less justice; it is sheer market competition. That is why the policy of election coverage in the commercial system of television mostly comes down to supply and demand, and is measured by the designing and broadcasting cost of political spots.

As far as *national television* is concerned, this system seems to be inclined to those parties or individual candidates whose political programs are closer to politicians in power. It is illusory to consider national television and its other media to be impartial towards all political contenders. It has not been empirically proved anywhere, and will never be as long as the state government is structured upon the principles of participation in power on account of election results.

By analysing the totality of promotional activities of the national television, we can notice two constant features of its behaviour: giving preference to the ruling party or coalition, while neglecting other parties and candidates, especially those from the opposition. Namely, the allies are promoted, while others get a smaller share of presentation in both quality and quantity, and the direct opposition is treated with a lot of criticism or is even completely excluded from the most important programs.

Neither this model shows any significant changes, because all parties in power act in the same way, regardless of their programs and political declarations in favour of the so called democratization of the media. As for the coverage of pre-election activities in Croatia, this pattern of behaviour is impossible to change even if the television management wanted it. Let us not forget that it is because of the number of 36 competing parties in the upcoming elections in Croatia, and the presentation of their activities would cover the entire TV program, if given an equal amount of space and time.

The national television direction triply reduces the pre-election activities: the ruling party gets full attention, the parties who are not direct competition are allowed to present short reports from individual rallies, and the activities of those smallest come down to a short newflash. As we can see from our political practice, this policy has been attacked by lesser parties and opposition, although they would act in exactly the same way if they got the power. The maximum of justice in the distribution of time in the national model of television is the degree of participation in the previous elections. According to this parliamentary representation, the greatest share of time is given to the winning party, while others get their share in proportion with the percentage of votes they won in the previous elections. The situation is not ver likely to change even under the influence of the fashionable principles of the so called “positive discrimination”, according to which lesser parties are more privileged than the ruling ones.

The maximum of justice in the distribution of time on the national television is the respect for previous achievements and giving each party the amount and share in television space accordingly to the percentage of the won votes.

Nowadays much has been said and written about the “*public*” television and public media in general ways to improve the system of coverage of the pre-election activities of parties and individuals. But, this model has not been operationalized, that is, it has remained on the level of the criticism of the existing situation. Namely, first of all, is not clear who and what the public is. According to ones, it is a supra-political authority presenting all pre-election activities in a more just and impartial way. But, one forgets that there is no supra-political power in the society, except in the case of its legal and revolutionary replacement of the existing power. It often happens that this model is reasonably called *journalocratic* model, because journalists are the ones who run the show in organizing all public promotional activities. Being human themselves, they are public or

concealed supporters of this or that political option and program, and this is the main reason why public television has not yet been established. Even in countries where television is called public, it is nothing other than *para* or *cripto* national television. At the moment it is impossible to find the key for establishing a body that would act in an optimal and just way, to the satisfaction of all concerned. In Croatia, such model is most audibly represented by “Forum 21”, although its members mostly have a bias towards other options, but instead admitting it, they prefer to disguise it as a “public” opinion.

However, the very concept of the public is deeply ideologized, rather than transparent. In a logical sense, it is even contradictory, since each television or medium acts in a public way, because it has a million-strong audience. At best, the representation of “the public” may take the form of criticism, in the sense that it may identify the lack of impartiality and morality as well as under-representation in the coverage of pre-election activities. However, the supporters of that model have no awareness of how to compress the complicated reality of everyday life into the frames of the TV screen. For the opposition, that concept is a cry to be more present in the TV programs, for the ruling party it is a cry for the dominant place on TV screens, and for small marginal parties it is a cry to be given some space as well. We have already highlighted the technical unfeasibility of the request “that all should be equally presented to the public”, because 36 parties can never be equally present on the TV screen. To make that happen, the following preconditions should be met. Firstly, political awareness should be raised, and then the demand that each party to be registered as a party should have at least about 10.000 members. A political morphology can then be formed, such as we can see in developed countries: the Left, the Centre and the Right, with some parties in between one or another. Two wings dominate the political scene of the USA; while one of them is in power, the other serves as a controller and public critic, and the change of power takes place as soon as the ruling wing is compromised, that is, fails to realize the promises of its programs.

All the above mentioned indicates that the *representative model* of the coverage of political activities is closest to truth, because it proceeds from the model of scientific research. If the public equals “general will” in the sense of Rousseau's definition, it can not be estimated in numbers, but by qualitative methodologies to discover deeper layers containing general will, which is the essence of the public as such. This model insists on the representative quality, rather than simple summarizing. Although we think that this model will improve the elections in 21st century, at the moment it is impossible to render it practical, nevertheless, it should be continuously emphasized as a corrective to the quantitative democracy insisting on a simple arithmetic mean and thus supporting the misconception that all votes are equally worth.

Developing the Election Coverage Approach on The Croatian Radio-and-Television (HRT)

Immediately after the Croatian War of Independence, the The Croatian Radio-and-Television, as the most powerful medium in Croatia, approached the problem of making the coverage of pre-election activities more professional and moral, with full responsibility and democratic awareness.

Six basic principles were stressed in its Declaration on the Principles of Professional Activity of Journalists in Public Media in the Context of the Upcoming Elections, on 27 September 1995.

The first principle is that “in their activities and work journalists shall make efforts toward the establishment of democratic relations in the society and stand up for a more tolerant and open dialogue on a civilization level.”

The second principle obliges journalists “to contribute to the development of pluralism of ideas and viewpoints, to consistently defend human rights and freedoms, to contribute to the strengthening of the law-respecting society and effectiveness of the civil society, and as a part of the democratic public, to participate in the controlling of the authorities of government and politics.”

In the third principle, the accent is put on the professional activity, which “obliges them to write the truth”, to respect the integrity of all persons and to treat all candidates equally, avoiding any impartiality.

The fourth principle stresses the right of journalists to be politically engaged, but if so, they must “be freed from all journalist's obligations”, lest they should abuse or use them for their own promotion.

The provisions of the last two principles are still being actualized.

From this journalistic platform it is clear that this code of behaviour comprises all complex problems of journalistic coverage of pre-election activities and that it keeps up with the world's highest achievements.

With the passing of time and the development of Croatian democracy, similar documents have elaborated more specific forms of good media coverage of pre-election activities. In the document called “Observations on the Coverage of Elections in Croatian Daily Newspapers and The Croatian Radio-and-Television” (January 1997) The Croatian Journalist Association stresses:

1. Media should be at the service of the community, not politicians and interest groups, in order to help the citizens to choose the best political options in an easier and more accurate way.

2. As for the principles of truth, media should, regardless of the orientation and political preferences of an individual daily newspaper, treat news and information sections in a completely impartial way with respect to the contents, placing and design, because it is the basic pre-requisite of a fair political competition.

3. The Croatian Radio-and-Television, substantially financed by obligatory subscription, should function as public television, or as public radio, that is, be the property of all citizens. (The word “public television” appeared here for the first time officially in a code, although it was not clearly stated what it practically meant and how to actualize the concept of public, and who the representative of the public should be).

4. For media to do their job fairly and professionally in the pre-election time, they must use all journalistic genres. This is to stress the standardization of journalistic technology in representing persons and parties and the demand that all should be equally more appropriately presented in genre terms, rather than giving a just a newsflash to one party, and a whole interview or a story to another.

5. It is desirable that The Croatian Radio-and-Television should continue to provide space for pre-election presentation of parties free of charge, but the duration of such presentations should be considerably shorter, moderate and appropriate to the power of the party, while the contents should be decided by the party.

It is evident from this code that The Croatian Journalist Association is working on its implantation in journalistic activities and making efforts towards a more equal presentation of all parties and party candidates, towards the culture of a public dialogue and the introduction of “public” television.

Understanding the importance of The Croatian Radio-and-Television in the coverage of elections, its management issued a more elaborate Code on the Work and Behaviour of The Croatian Radio-and-Television on 15 December 1998. In this operable document the number of articles has increased to 18. In addition to being compliant with the existing provisions of earlier documents, this document is more specific in defining the behaviour of employees (not exclusively journalists) of The Croatian Radio-and-Television in observing the truth, no-insults and no-slander principles in their writing, and developing the culture of public dialogue, as well as the respect for all participants of the political pre-election competition.

Understanding its own media importance and responsibility in the current electoral year, The Croatian Radio-and-Television issued a “The Croatian Radio-and-Television Program Regulations for Covering Elections” on 28 September 1999. To be able to control all segments of the complex process of the media coverage of the elections to be held on 3 January 2000, these regulations proscribe precise obligations of journalists to act in a proper and democratic way, in addition to their moral behaviour towards the contents, persons and parties involved, in order to observe the fully democratic procedure of the elections. A special stress was given to the general provisions of the principles of balance, integrity and impartiality towards all parties and candidates. Pursuant to Item 7 journalists are obliged not to publish unprofessional, incomplete public researches with a more of an advertising than scientific character. This requirement is a reasonable one, because there has been so much inaccurate “polling” that compromised the newspapers treating the elections as a very unserious matter.

Article 10 provided the forming of a special committee to discuss all complaints, and in case of their being justified, broadcast them in shows.

In the spirit of absolute democracy, Article 15 provided that the timetable for the presentation of candidates should be decided by lot, which is a much more fair procedure than giving continuous preference to candidates from more prominent parties.

Thanks to insisting on justice and objectivity, and avoiding insults and slander (especially by journalists), The Croatian Radio-and-Television succeeded in reaching the leading position not only in the coverage of pre-election activities, but in its total journalistic activity, which is clearly shown by the fact that The Croatian Radio-and-Television is involved in less than 5% out of 600 criminal proceedings.

Because of the immense importance of the elections on 3 January 2000, the participants of the Day of Croatian Journalism in Opatija in October 1999 adopted the following requirements and warnings:

- “Media should be at the service of community and not politicians and interest groups;
- The Croatian Radio-and-Television, financed through obligatory subscription should function as a public medium, that is, the property of all citizens;
- Regardless of the orientation and political preferences of an individual medium, the news and information section must be completely impartial in contents, placing and design;
- For media to do their job fairly and professionally, they must use all genres, especially the direct interfacing of candidates;
- It is desirable that Croatian Radio-and-Television should continue to provide TV space for pre-election presentation of parties free of charge. The duration of such presentations should be based on the percentage of votes won in the previous elections, and the parties must be allowed to decide freely upon the contents and presentation method of such shows;
- A paid pre-election campaign in the media should not be understood as a way to get a quick and easy profit, but one of the ways of pre-election informing of citizens;
- Taking into consideration the importance of local, private and commercial radio-diffusion in the development of a democratic society, The Croatian Journalist Association is making efforts towards the creation of such legislative frameworks to enable the small electronic media to equally participate in the Croatian media landscape”.

In the spirit of these requirements, The Croatian Journalist Association appealed to all media owners to protect journalists from possible political and other pressures that could prevent them from doing their job professionally at the time of pre-election campaign.

As is obvious in this developmental analysis, The Croatian Radio-and-Television and The Croatian Journalist Association have made serious efforts towards the implementation of the positive experience of democratic countries in their work in their coverage of pre-election activities.

Final Discussion

The Croatian Journalist Association, The Croatian Radio-and-Television and other more prominent media have in the past period made continuous efforts towards the democratization and professionalization of the media, especially in the coverage of the totality of election activities.

In the first year, the year of 1995, the basic rules of objectivity, fair-play, the culture of dialogue and protection of privacy of all participants in pre-election activities were established. That is why journalists of The Croatian Radio-and-Television were not criminally prosecuted. Moreover, almost all 600 proceedings against the abuse of journalists were started against the private media, especially from the opposition, because of slander and insults. Namely, those journalists have violated the journalistic code in the name of the freedom of speech. However, they were forgetting that their understanding of the category of freedom of journalism was inaccurate, since that freedom is constrained within strictly defined frames of the international codification of public communication aimed at the protection of persons involved from insults, slander and attacks to their privacy and person.

It is now obvious that a lesson could be drawn from this pathology of journalism, especially by journalists themselves and their editors-in-chief who are equally responsible for publishing insults, presentation without evidence, and slander. Namely, from the past informal pre-election campaign it is obvious that the culture of political dialogue is much more serious, argued and more tolerant than in the previous period, when passions overcame reason and arguments, and sheer lust for power infatuated many participants in the pre-election campaigns.

Whether this conclusion is to be realized at the time of the actual pre-election campaign upcoming in a few days, will be shown in the practice. However, a certain optimism of this conclusion is based on several pre-requisites: first, because mixed committees have been set up for prompt and up-to-date dealing with any complaints coming up in the campaign; second, because the public dialogue is now much more civilized and polite than it used to be; third, because media themselves have started applying those codes of behaviour (the best example for this is a suspension of a journalist of Radio 101 who unseemly, morbidly and offensively wrote about the last President's illness) and fourth, because the essence of the democratic procedure of pre-election activities are objectivity, tolerance, well-arguedness and respect for all participants of the pre-election campaign, as journalists already noticed among themselves, in a self-critical way.

We can hope that these theoretical pre-requisites will be implemented, which is an irrefutable evidence that democratic awareness in Croatia is being developed in all its segments, especially in the segment of covering and informing the public about pre-election campaigns. Namely, all participants are beginning to understand that the realization of mature democracy depends on the fair-play of the political campaign, in making electoral decisions as to whom the voters should give their trust and mandate for managing the public affairs of the country.

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