*Hannu-Pekka Laiho**

Power and role of media in crisis

Summary

This article explores the media and journalists' influence - power and role - especially in crisis reporting during the last decades since Vietnam War. Is the media independent operator or carried out by political leaders and other opinion makers who are defining the agenda for journalists? Can media be a tool for political leaders, when they prepare their nation to the war?

The article examines the role of media in the internal development of Yugoslavia in 1980's, and tries to find answers weather journalists understood 20 years ago, ie in the late 1980s, that the country was rapidly slipping into a civil war? Would it have prevented the crisis in the Balkans, if the journalists had acted differently? Have journalists contributed to the progression of the crisis? What role the war propaganda played in 1980ies and 1990ies?

Article will also touch the ethical issues of journalism. Do journalists understand the content of their power. Do they know how to use this tool in a more cautious way?

Key Words: Media, Power, Role, Crisis, War, Ethics

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Moć i uloga medija u krizama

Sažetak

Ovaj članak istražuje medijski i novinarski utjecaj, odnosno njihovu snagu i ulogu, posebno u kriznim izvješćima tijekom zadnjeg desetljeća od Vijetnamskog rata. Je li medij neovisan operator ili to obavljaju politički vođe ili drugi stvaraoci mišljenja koji određuju dnevni red za novinare. Može li medij biti alat za političke vođe kad pripremaju svoju naciju za rat?

Ovaj članak istražuje ulogu medija u unutarnjem razvoju Jugoslavije u 1980-ima i pokušava naći odgovore jesu li novinari razumjeli prije dvadeset godina, npr. kasnih osamdesetih, da zemlja srlja u građanski rat? Bi li spriječilo krizu na Balkanu da su se novinari ponašali drukčije? Jesu li novinari doprinijeli razvoju krize? Koju je ulogu imala ratna propaganda u 1980-ima i u 1990-ima?

Članak će se također dotaći pitanja etičnosti novinara. Razumiju li novinari koju moć imaju? Znaju li kako koristiti ovaj instrument na pažljiviji način?

Ključne riječi: medij, moć, uloga, rat, etičnost

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During the last decade, media and the power of media have been under a lively debate in many countries. The public debate has tried to define weather media can be so powerful that even the political decision makers will formulate their agenda to match the so called public opinion. Or is it the other way round?

Much of the discussion has been related with the wars - in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Congo or Georgia. There are plenty of other examples too. Italian media has been under constant monitoring, because of Premier minister Sylvio Berlusconi. His media enterprises are counted to cover two thirds of Italian media coverage and when he as a prime minister, has the authority to nominate the leaders of the state owned broadcasting company RAI, it is said that Mr. Berlusconi can use the media to support his political agenda. *(Hanretty, Chris, The Gospel Truths of Italian Media Bias, Communicazione Politica vol. VIII n. 1 Primavera 2007)*

In Finland and in United Kingdom media have revealed malpractices in the way politicians are using public money. In Finland the question was weather the parties should tell where they get the money to run huge election campaigns, and in U.K. the headlines unfolded how the members of parliament had misused the expenditure compensation system. *(Helsingin Sanomat, www.hs.fi)*

In Slovenia the political elite has been under investigation, because Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE argued in a programme that Finnish-French defence company Patria has paid bribes to leading Slovenian ministers to win a 278 million euro public tender for 135 armoured personnel carriers. The investigation is still going on in Finland and in Slovenia. *(Slovenian Press Agency STA, http://www.sta.si/en/vest.php?id=135 6834&s=a)*

In all these cases politicians have claimed that media have too much power and influence, and that media is not only concentrating to publish the findings and facts but it is taking political sides too.

It is obvious that the relationship between public authorities and media will remain tense and controversial in the future too. The development in the digital communication and social media will change the mass communication environment dramatically in the near future, and that will cause new coalitions.

BBC World's news anchor Nik Goving writes in his new study that in the new millennium the institutions of power – governmental, political, military and corporate – face a new accurate vulnerability, because of the

technical digital development in communication techniques. Gowing talks about the new fast increasing and omniprecent breed of "information-doers". Gowing argues in his study that the unprecedented mass ability to bear witness and record dramatic, unfolding events on cheap, lightweight, go-anywhere technologies is defining a new, broader, almost infinite media matrix. Routinely it wrong foots and catches off guard the institutions of power in a crisis, leaving them open to both accusations, and the appearance, of failure. *(Gowing, Nik, Skyful of Lies and Black Hawks, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2009)*

In the United States journalists and scientists have for several years tried to determine what role media and journalists had while covering the events before the war broke out in Iraq in 2003 and during the aftermath of the war too. The debate has been closely connected with the campaign which president George W. Bush's and his administration called "the war against terrorism".

Christian Science Monitor reviews in March 2008 article how the US media has portrayed the war, five years after the invasion of Iraq. *(Christian Science Monitor, March 19, 2008, http://www.csmonitor.com/2008 /0319/p08s01-comv.html)*

Journal's article points out that mostly the media have done well, but media also played an unaware role in the discreet battle to influence public opinion. "Despite their best efforts to be credibly neutral and act as the eyes and ears on a distant war, journalists must also contend with efforts by both the Pentagon and insurgents in Iraq to practice what experts call "information operations," or IO – attempts to sway media reports".

It seems obvious that even the opposite side – that is the insurgents in Iraq – have used the media to transmit their messages to the public too. A study made in Harvard University, indicates that the terrorists had a strategy when timing their bombs. When news of violence created a spike in US public debate from 2003 to 2007, the study found, insurgents increased attacks by 5 to 10 percent in an apparent attempt to influence that debate even more. *(Iyengar, Radha and Monten, Jonathan, Is There an "Emboldenment" Effect? Evidence from the Insurgency in Iraq, Harvard, May 2008, http://people.rwj.harvard.edu/~riyengar/insurgency.pdf)*

The US government, too, have influenced how reporters frame the war's story line.

In my own study I found out that Time magazine – when writing about the Iraq war and when trying to justify the war – used anonymous government sources to give out confidential information, and in that way to support the war. During 2003-2006 Time published only few critical articles. The tendency was an overall, quite often even patriotic support, to the U.S. troops. *(Laiho, Hannu-Pekka, The roles of different sources in Time magazine's Iraq war coverage in 2003-2008, unpublished report, Helsinki)*

The press in U.S. and in some other coalition countries, already stands accused of not doing enough before the war to probe the Bush administration's arguments for the invasion, whether it was Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons or the prospects of implanting democracy in Iraq.

According to Christian Science Monitor, journalists admit they relied too much on US officials and on military escorts for protection in gathering information. in a 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center of journalists who worked in Iraq, more than a third said their poorest coverage was in the war's impact on Iraqi civilians. *(http://pewresearch.org/pubs/770/iraq-war-five-year-anniversary)*

Media – the fourth estate

In traditional thinking, media are the fourth estate, three others being legislative power (the parliament), executive power (the cabinet) and jurisdiction (courts). Professor, PhD. Kaarle Nordenstreng, Tampere University, Finland, has reflected on the media's role in one of his lectures. Professor Nordenstreng sees media's role in relations to the authorities somehow complex. Media's role can be monitorial (a follower), facilitative (a contributor), radical (a convulser) or collaborative (an auxiliary).

It is apparent that media have influence and power. This is why those in power have seen media as on opportunity to convey their messages – good and bad ones - via print and electronic media.

During the last half a century the media coverage have been accused to have a great influence to the world history. Donald Humphreys writes in an article published on the Museum of Broadcast Communication web page that media in U.S. had a role, when the public turned against the Vietnam War. Weather it was because television, in

particular, and the media, in general, which presented it unfavourably, or whether the public turned against the war because media accurately depicted its horrors and television did so remains an open and hotly contested question in the public debate.

Vietnam War was anyhow a trigger in the U.S. for the military and public relations strategists working with the politicians to start to investigate the role of the media in the formation of public opinion. As the war progressed, military analysts continued to debate whether it was appropriate for the military to attempt to influence civilian public policy through such efforts. Within military circles and in the wake of the Vietnam War, most such debates were left behind and media relations strategies went far beyond censorship and toward a full-fledged engagement (some say co-optation) of televised media.

The much discussed interaction between military and television happened already during the first Gulf war - the U.S.-led 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. In the aftermath of that war, television and other media were criticized for having failed to provide a balanced and complete coverage of the war. Some critics argued that television and other media failed to provide a balanced and complete account of the war because the corporate owners of commercial networks felt it was not in their business interest to do so. Other critics suggest that television coverage simply reflects popular prejudices. To a great extent, however, during the actual war, as in previous wars, the various national media had to rely on the military forces for access to events and for access to their broadcast networks. *(Hamphreys, Doland, War on television, The Museum on Broadcast Communication, http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=warontelevi)*

After the first Gulf war the media's role has been under heavy surveillance. Media's played a central role in the Balkan wars – in Slovenia 1991, in Croatia 1991-95, in Bosnia Herzegovina 1992-95, in Serbia and Kosovo 1998-99.

The civil war in Rwanda 1990-94 is one of the few examples where to role of journalists has been investigated. The news media played a crucial role in the 1994 Rwanda genocide: local media fuelled the killings, while the international media either ignored or seriously misconstrued what was happening. Local radio and print media were used as a tool of hate, encouraging neighbours to turn against each other. Rwanda genocide is one of the few wars where the accountability of the media has been brought to court. Journalists in charge of the bias media coverage and hate

speeches were brought to International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The tribunal has investigated the role of the media in the genocide. *(Thompson, Allan, The Media and Rwanda Genocide, Pluto Press/Fountain Publishers, 2007)*

The war on terrorism (2001 – and still ongoing) and the second Iraq war (2003 – ongoing) have also been wars where media and journalists have played a central role. September the 11th 2001 – the New York Twin Tower attack – started a process in western world in which the media changed its traditional way of reporting. Especially American media turned to support the wars in a very patriotic way. The American flags, yellow ribbons and other national symbols appeared on TV news screens, major networks run programmes to support the American troops, and some eminent journalists were fired because they expressed critical comments. Peter Arnett – a well know correspondent for the CNN during the first Iraq war in 1991 – was fired from NBC because he questioned the U.S. role in the war and Phil Donahue and his prime time talk show was replaced in NBC by Keith Olbermann, because Donahue expressed critical views against president George W. Bush's Iraq policy.

The Role of Media in Conflict – a peace maker or an agitator

The power of journalism and the power of media are so frequently used terms that we seldom ask, what we do mean with the expression power of journalism.

A Norwegian professor Martin Eide has for years made research on the role and power of media and journalists have in the society as well as on sociological aspects of news production. In an article published in Nordicom Review, Eide states that the power of journalism is decisive in the exercise of power and democracy in modern societies. Hardly any modern institution or social actor is untouched by the prevailing media logic. The professional ideology of journalism, the dramaturgical power of journalism and the particular role of modern popular journalism are considered.

According to Eide the power of media and journalism is not power as such. Power is frequently conceptualised as a relational phenomenon.

Power is not a capacity that is possessed by an agent once and for all. Neither is it permanently anchored in certain social structures. Power appears in multiple and floating ways and typically displays itself through discourses and prevailing logic. Accordingly, journalism and the impact of journalistic logic on social actors' courses of action should be of central interest in an updated social theory of power.

In first hand, journalism has an importance to agenda-setting power. Secondly, journalism is of relevance for the power implied in non-decisions and issues that never reaches a public agenda. Thirdly, journalism is decisive in questions concerning ideology, hegemony and symbolic power. In short: None of these three dimensions of power can be properly understood if the role of journalism is neglected. *(Eide, Martin, Nordicom Review, Encircling the Power of Journalism, 2007).*

Among many of the roles media have been offer, one is a peace maker. Quite many international organizations have been established, and a considerable amount of time and resources has been used to researches.

Steven Livingston from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) says that international media sources such as the BBC, CNN, al Arabiya, and al Jazeera have global reach, and as such have an "agenda-setting effect." This effect, as Steven Livingston explained, revolves around the ideological components of political disagreements, and more specifically the way key actors in conflict seek to manipulate public perceptions of the disagreement.

Actors in any conflict will seek to either minimize or exaggerate the conflict, depending upon their relative position of power. Weak actors will want to "socialize" the conflict—that is, to enlist allies in their cause against a greater power and to increase the perception of suffering. Actors in positions of dominance seek to "privatize" the conflict and limit attention to or awareness of the conflict. Those who are weak will seek to draw media coverage to the conflict while those who in power will seek to minimize the extent of the problems. *(Bajraktari, Yll, The Role of Media in Conflict, The Unites States Institute of Peace, http://www.usip.org/resources/role-media-conflict).*

According to Livingston's research, the amount of death and destruction does not correlate with the media attention the media. The international media seems a very random actor of conflict coverage.

Media's divisive role: case in the Balkans

Kemal Kurspahic, the author of a book Prime Time Crime, Balkan media in War and Peace (USIP Press Books, 2003) and the former editor-in-chief for the Sarajevo daily Oslobodjenje 1988-94 said in his book, that the media's actions in the Balkans are a prime example of how the media can be a source of antagonism and an instigator of conflict rather than a source for peace.

Kurspahic claims that each side (Serbian and Croatian) propagated an "us versus them" mentality among their respective populations. The media went even so far that journalists invented crimes, flamed ethnic tensions and ruined peacemaking efforts

by failing to objectively present views of the minority. In Belgrade, those who opposed the war were signalled out as traitors. Had their voices been heard, others might have been inspired to non-violent means of resistance and channels for negotiation could have opened before violence ensued.

When Kurspahic investigates the media's role in Yugoslavia's collapse, he writes that the so called warlords in former Yugoslavia, led by Slobodan Milosevic, would not have succeeded unless a nationalist euphoria had not been generated in the first place. A key player in the creation of an environment, in which the country's collapse occurred, is the media. Media cooperated with the nationalist elites, churches and religious communities. Kurspahic claims that every bullet and artillery shell fired, every fallen civilian, every concentration camp prisoner, and every destroyed cultural and historical monument, was preceded by careful media preparation.

People coming from outside of former Yugoslavia – like I did in 1992 – had great difficulties to understand for example the Serbian TV coverage and programming. I watched in Zagreb Serbian TV, and programmes from Serbian part of Bosnia Herzegovina for several months before the former Yugoslav TV transmitters were turned off.

The role of Orthodox Church and the priests in the war propaganda was central. Same applied to academics and nationalistic opinion leaders.

Serbia foremost, but also Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose media Kurspahic analyzes in his book, became models of societies

in which professional immorality and irresponsibility served nationalistic goals.

As Kurspahic writes, "Once the demons of the Balkans' myths and history had been unleashed, flooding the newspaper pages and radio and television programs with horrifying stories of once-good neighbours as dangerous enemies, the nationalist controlled media became instigators—not just witnesses—of terror, killings and exodus of genocide proportions. The front pages of newspapers and evening television newscasts churned out a nightmarish years-long prime time crime."

Due to the Kurspahic's Sarajevo background, his book is not maybe the most balanced description of the events the Balkans, but it gives a frightening picture on the roles media played in all former Yugoslav states during 35-year long rule of President Josip Broz Tito, after his death 1980s and especially during the 1990s when the war broke out.

Unbalanced, uneven development in Yugoslavia's federal states during the 1980s

When one gets acquainted with the recent Yugoslav history, many observers take up the development during the 1980s as the key to understand why the country slides to a civil war. President Tito died in 1980, but the signs that the division of power after him might be challenging, were visible already years before.

If we investigate the development from the media's angle, it is true that some incidents predicted that an internal conflict might have been evolving, but evolution for example in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia was uneven.

It was not easy for the journalists to alter the way they have worked under the communist regime. It was even more complicated to the old party leaders to understand what was happening with the institutions they had control for decades.

Professors Stjepan Malovic and Gary W. Selnow describe the development in Yugoslav states in details in their book The People, Press and Politics of Croatia, Peager 2001. Total confusion spread in the society as well to the newsrooms. Some advanced journalists understood what

media freedom is all about, but many continued to rely on the old, safe communist structures and procedures. When the whole socialistic Eastern Europe was shaking and changing, people understood that something will happen in Yugoslavia too. Voices of wider independence for federal states where mixed with nationalistic demands and accusations.

There was great concern, that the dawning freedom of the media will be destroyed, when journalist didn't act in a responsible way. Professor Davor Robin from Zagreb University is quoted in the Malovic-Selnow book by saying "We are loosing media freedom, when journalists attack, insult, lie and twist the truth about the past, present and the future". Professor Robin's only hope was the free public, which can save the freedom.

In communist Yugoslavia journalism was understood to be a part of the political environment. Journalists were regarded as social-political workers, who supported the goals of the regime. When dissident journalists tried to enjoy their freedom, they were silenced by the party.

The Yugoslav state structures were staggering and politicians did not find common ground to proceed. It was important to all federal leaders to guarantee that their own ethnic groups supported them. One tool in this was nationalism.

Researcher Mikko Jokela, Jyvaskyla University, Finland, studied in his master thesis the Serbian heritage and the nationalistic politics which took the power from the past. He concluded that this policy was one of the major reasons why Yugoslavia entered to a civil war. The manipulation was lead by Slobodan Milosevic, who in 1986 rose to the leadership of the Serbian League of Communists, soon after the document known as the Memorandum of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts was published. The document consisted of a long list of Serb grievances and discrimination against Serbs.

Slobodan Milosevic managed to convince his own nation and people that Serbia has always been a victim. The Serbian people have according to Milosevic nationalistic politic lived for centuries in agony, suffering during the invasions of Ottomans and others. Milosevic's media machine succeeded to convince ethnic Serbs that they faced imminent danger from their fellow citizens in other former Yugoslav republics and provinces.

Mikko Jokela concludes that towards the end of 1980s, many liberal journalists in Serbia, lost their job and an atmosphere of fear helped

Milosevic to strengthen his grip on the media. Milosevic fully understood the power of media and the importance of exerting control over it. Especially the Serbian radio and television and the Politika newspaper were the strongholds for the probaganda. According to Warren Zimmerman, the last American Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Milosevic met with the head of Belgrade Radio-Television every day. *(Jokela, Mikko, Serbian menneisyyspolitiikka 1980- ja 90-luvuilla, Jyvaskyla university, 2002).*

Situation in Croatia was different. In a workshop - Freedom without responsibility or responsibility without freedom - organized in September 2009 at the Zadar University, department of tourism and communication science, participants stated that the development in Croatia compared with the situation in Serbia was much different. All the participants were eminent Croatian journalists who worked in the newspapers and radio-television. In early 1980s, even towards the end of 1980s, no one thought that they would face a cruel civil war at the beginning of 1990s.

There was much happening in the Croatian media and media structures too, but somehow journalists did not feel that the political grip was strengthening. There were some nationalistic developments, but even the memorandum by Serbian Academy of Science and Arts and Slobodan Milosevic famous speech in Kosovo Polje and the demonstrations were seen in other parts of Yugoslavia more like an internal Serbian issue.

The Serbian television's emotional, patriotic journalism influenced the Serbians living in other parts of Yugoslavia, especially in Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina. The federal states elections in 1990 – still held under old Yugoslav law – brought to power politicians who favoured independence and did not support the Yugoslav collective. This caused tension among the Serbs in Croatia and they organized demonstrations in August 1990 in the middle of best Adriatic holiday season. Foreign tourists escaped from the coast, the police in Croatia was not strong enough to stop the unrest. Serbs had arms and some people were killed.

Serbian television supported strongly the demonstrators and the coverage from Belgrade was seen as very biased. The Zadar university workshop participants claimed that it was very clear that the leaders of Croatian Serbs got constantly instructions from Milosevic lead Serbian regime. There were several examples when the opinions and movement of the crowds were almost like "remote controlled". At the same time the Croatian authorities were trying to form a functioning administration

because most of the Yugoslav structures were breaking up. There were no proper police force, military was under Serbian command, many media outlets were without leadership. *(The Zadar university panel discussion consisted of media professionals, scientists and journalists Davorka Mezic, Elsa Radulic, Bozidar Simunic, Toni Pajkin, Bozidar Klaric, Zvanko Kucelin, Nedjeljko Jusup, Josip Vidakovis and Stjepan Malovic).*

Television – a propaganda weapon?

The role of media and the propaganda in former Yugoslavia has been investigated and reported for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. The 97-pages report was written for the so called Haag Tribunal by a French professor Renaud de la Brosse from the University of Reims, Champagne, Ardennes, France. The report is a part of the material which was used during the Slobodan Milosevic case.

In both the Croatia and Bosnia indictments, one of Milosevic's alleged contributions to a joint criminal enterprise to ethnically cleanse large areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was his use of the Serbian state media to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred among Serbs by spreading "exaggerated and false messages of ethnically based attacks by Bosnian Muslims and Croats against Serb people."

De la Brosse writes that Milosevic began his efforts to control audio-visual media in 1986-87 and the process was finished in summer 1991. "The media offensive launched by Belgrade contributed to the appearance of equally detestable propaganda in other Yugoslav republics and its after-effects would be felt for years," the report said, quoting former Reuters Sarajevo correspondent Daniel Deluce. De la Brosse claims the Serbian authorities used the media as a weapon in their military campaign. "In Serbia specifically, the use of media for nationalist ends and objectives formed part of a well-thought through plan - itself part of a strategy of conquest and affirmation of identity". Milosevic' propaganda was effective, in part, because the society was in transition from. An ideology that largely defined people for 50 years, was vanishing. The nationalist ideology, dating back even 600 years – mixed with historical legends, partly based on facts, partly on fiction - provided an answer.

By the early Nineties, an extremist element of rising Croatian nationalism fed the flames of fear, especially in Serb majority regions of Croatia, by rehabilitating Ustashe symbols. The new Serbian identity became one in opposition to the "other" - Croats (collapsed into Ustashe) and Muslims (collapsed into "Turks").

The report says Milosevic's propaganda campaign was based on the same techniques as used by Adolf Hitler, with the added power of television. "Nazi propaganda had shown that myths bind the masses together tightly. Indeed, it was through myths and, therefore, the appeal to the forces of the unconscious, to fear and terror, the instinct of power and the lost community that the propaganda orchestrated by Goebbels had succeeded in winning over the Germans and melding them into a compact mass."

Serbian television and radio's repetitive use of pejorative descriptions, such as "Ustashe hordes", "Vatican fascists", "Mujahedin fighters", "fundamentalist warriors of Jihad", and "Albanian terrorists", quickly became part of common usage.

Unverified stories, presented as fact, were turned into common knowledge - for example, that Bosnian Muslims were feeding Serb children to animals in the Sarajevo zoo. In these stories, friends and neighbours, fellow countrymen and women were turned into "the other", lacking humanising or individual characteristics.

Another example of misleading information was a television broadcast of corpses, described as Serb civilians killed by Croats, which are believed to be in fact the bodies of Croats killed by Serbs. De la Brosse described how Radio Television Serbia, RTS, portrayed events in Dubrovnik and Sarajevo, "The images shown of Dubrovnik came with a commentary accusing those from the West who had taken the film of manipulation and of having had a tyre [sic] burnt in front of their cameras to make it seem that the city was on fire.

"As for the shells fired at Sarajevo and the damage caused, for several months it was simply as if it had never happened in the eyes of Serbian television viewers because Belgrade television would show pictures of the city taken months and even years beforehand to deny that it had ever occurred."

According to the report the Serbian public got same kind of misleading information about Vukovar. "Serbian Radio Television created a strange universe in which Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, had never been

besieged and in which the devastated Croatian town of Vukovar had been 'liberated'."

For the print media, Milosevic's methods were different. He allowed the independent press to publish, but the distribution was extremely limited. Milosevic controlled the press by limiting the usage of paper, equipments and demanding special licences or fining the publishers.

According to the de la Brosse report, official Serbian propaganda reached more than 3.5 million people every night. That was even more effective, because public did not have alternative sources for information. (*Brosse de la, Renaud, Political Propaganda and the Plan to Cresate a "State for all Serbs", Consequences of using the Media for Ultra Nationalists Ends, report can be found from*

http://hague.bard.edu/reports/de_la_brosse_pt1.pdf or
http://www.icty.org/x/cases/oric/tjug/en/ori-jud060630e.pdf or
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Role_of_Serbian_media_in_the_Yugoslav_Wars)

Journalists to court in Serbia

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in Haag has prosecuted political and military leader from former Yugoslavia, but the possible crimes conducted by journalists haven't been investigated.

Now the Serbia's war crimes prosecutor has a plan to investigate the role of media in spreading ethnic hatred and encouraging war crimes during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The prosecutor announced his plans in late June 2009, in Belgrade trials on the massacre of 200 Croats at the Ovcara farm near Vukovar in 1991 and the murder of 25 Bosniaks in Zvornik in 1992. The men accused for the crimes told in the court that certain reports from electronic media incited them to commit the crimes.

In an article published by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), many Balkan experts express their doubt, that the case will proceed to the court.

Filip David, former editor of drama programmes at Serbian state TV said in the IWPR interview that "it's late because so much time has passed, many have died or have been forgotten, and it's early, because many of those who were then orchestrating media are still in power, in

politics, and are still indirectly influencing media through the political parties they are in".

Vildana Selimbegovic, editor-in-chief at Sarajevo daily Oslobodjenje, states in the same report that "the initiative of the Serbian prosecution has come somewhat late. Some of those people have already returned to TV stations and press, forgetting what they did. But it would not be good that this turns into a witch hunt or personal confrontations. I am afraid there is a possibility that this could happen."

Professor Gordana Vilovic, an expert on the media in Croatia, said she was surprised at the news from Belgrade but thought the probe was a "great step forward", although it might be difficult to carry it through to the end. "Thinking about what would happen if this investigation took place in Croatia, I concluded that Croatia is still not mature enough to face things from the past, especially from the beginning of the war when the words of hatred were best heard," said Vilovic. (IWPR, Serbia Probes Media Role in war Crimes,
http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a4dbb6419.html).

Lessons learned

Europe saw big political changes in 1989 and the Federal State of Yugoslavia was soon falling apart. In the war - which started in 1991 and continued ten years – tens of thousands people lost their life or wounded. Still thousands of former Yugoslav citizens are living in exile or as refugees in the Balkans. It will take still many years before the region overcomes the war and misery.

Some would think that people have learned the lessons, and that the media and journalists are looking for the ways how to build up a safe and tolerant region.

In that context the recent headlines are staggering. According to the news, Bosnia Herzegovina is "on the brink of a new civil war". The political leaders of the Republica Serbska want to have independence for their part of Bosnia Herzegovina. *(Daily telegraph, Oct 19, 2009, Bosnia is heading for a new civil war,*
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/bosnia/6364680/Bosnia-on-brink-of-new-civil-war.html#)

The situation in the other unstable part of former Yugoslavia – that is Kosovo – remains tense too. The UN envoy Lamberto Zannier told the UN Security Council in October 2009 that, "although the situation in Kosovo has remained generally stable, the situation in the northern part of the territory remains an issue of concern. In August when the situation threatened to get out of hand, as tensions increased between local Serbs and Albanians, in a suburb of Mitrovica, UNMIK helped defuse the situation." *(UN envoy says situation in northern Kosovo remains a concern, Oct. 15, 2009, http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/detail/83923.html)*