

Stojan de Prato

Print Media in Croatia – Destroyed by Tabloidisation and De-Professionalisation

"Print media in Croatia have never been better", dared Gojko Drljača, executive editor of *Večernji list*, once a major Croatian daily newspaper, speaking to the audience of publishers and advertisers at the Weekend Media Festival. The three days of lectures, workshops, self-praising panels and parties, traditionally held at the end of summer, usually attract a couple of thousand publishers, advertisers, media-analysts and onlookers to Rovinj, historical city and popular resort on the western coast of Istria, heart-shaped peninsula in Northern Adriatic. Yet Drljača's words were nothing but wishful thinking, or self-deception, or just another attempt to lure more adverts to what remains of the once respectful Croatian newspaper.

The main theme of this year's festival was social responsibility. And this is exactly where most Croatian print media fail. Media are not just another business, they have an important social role to play: to thoroughly, accurately and timely inform the public so that the public can make informed choices. In that way, media are crucial for a proper functioning of the democratic system. Yet, the sorry state of print media in Croatia, yellow to the core, suggests that democracy in Croatia is in danger of being manipulated.

How did Croatian media become what they are, with a circulation that is just a fraction of its once glorious past?

Until 1990 Croatia was a federal state within socialist Yugoslavia. Despite the restraints of the *ancient regime*, the media scene in Croatia was rather lively and newspapers were not mere Communist party bulletins, as they mostly were in the Warsaw Pact countries. The first four to six pages of the daily newspapers were devoted to the government and party protocols; the rest was often very good journalism. The average daily circulation of the before mentioned *Večernji list*, popularly written yet relevant and reliable, was around 360,000; the more serious and analytical *Vjesnik* could reach almost 200,000 on a good day; regional dailies like *Slobodna Dalmacija* or *Novi list* were selling about 60,000 copies daily. Weekly newsmagazine *Danas* was often very critical of the ruling elite, while glossy bi-weekly *Start* promoted modern ideas, trends and culture. *Polet*, weekly published by the official Socialist Youth Organisation, stood behind the huge creative force that emerged in late seventies / early eighties through the excellent New Wave Zagreb music scene with hundreds of concerts of new local bands every month (some of those have in the meantime become Croatian classics), The New Square movement in comics, The Nouvelle Peinture in visual art, the novel short stories in literature... That was the real Croatian transition, marred by the war and privatisation in the nineties, and the media played an important role in both periods.

The years from 1989 until the beginning of the war in the late summer of 1991 were probably the best period for Croatian journalism, with total political and creative freedom accompanied by the highest ever circulation – the best selling *Večernji list* reached 450,000 daily in a nation of just around 4.4 million.

A sharp, often tenfold drop in salaries during the war year affected the media

circulation, but only by a third on average compared to the highest pre-war numbers. Yet the Tuđman regime tried its utmost to put media under its tight control. The change of the editor in chief and the streamlining of the editorial policy with Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) political party's ideas effectively killed the *Danas* newsmagazine. *Vjesnik* became de facto a government bulletin, while *Večernji list* returned to the first four to six party controlled pages policy. Soon *Večernji list* was privatised by an obscure offshore fund, later to be revealed that its owners were close to the right wing of Tuđman's HDZ party. The refusal of *Novi List* and *Slobodna Dalmacija* to bow to Tuđman promoted those regional dailies to the national level, but the latter was soon put under control of the ruling party. Its satirical supplement *Feral Tribune* split and became a fiercely anti-Tuđman weekly newsmagazine, while *Novi list* remained the only really independent daily.

Tabloidisation as a war and post-war trend

The war and transition period saw the emergence of a new trend in Croatian media: tabloids. For the better part of their first decade tabloids were exclusively weeklies. The first one, *Slobodni tjednik*, started in early 1990 with an anti-Tuđman editorial policy, but soon its chauvinist headlines were screaming hatred against 'enemies of the state', while its articles contained lists of alleged spies 'that should be taken care of'. As any novelty, it attracted considerable interest in the beginning, but soon after its owner Marinko Božić died of AIDS in 1993, *Slobodni tjednik* became extinct.

A more successful tabloid, *Globus*, was started in December of 1990 by Ninoslav Pavić, former editor in chief of *Polet* and later a political columnist for *Vjesnik*, faithful to the Communist party, and his then friend Denis Kuljiš, who also used to contribute to *Polet*. Just like *Slobodni tjednik*, *Globus* in the beginning used to publish witch-hunting articles. One of the most scandalous ever published in Croatian media was "The Witches from Rio", in which it alleged that four female authors were enemies of the newly independent Croatia. Later *Globus* turned to investigative journalism, both real, based on investigations conducted by its journalists, and fictional ones, based on real or fake documents supplied by various conflicting fractions within the ruling elite. In 1995 Kuljiš split from Pavić to start, together with former photojournalist Ivo Pukanić, another weekly tabloid, *Nacional*, following more or less the same editorial policy as *Globus*. Both newspapers later changed from tabloid to glossy newsmagazine format and became more serious.

Nacional, often accused of promoting obscure and criminal interests in some of its articles, perished last summer, almost four years after mafia killers had murdered Ivo Pukanić. His murderers have been convicted, but they managed to conceal the identity of the person who paid for the crime.

Globus, in the meantime, has become the seed from which Pavić's media empire Europa Press Holding (EPH) sprouted. In April 1998, EPH published the first successful Croatian daily newspaper in almost half a century, named *Jutarnji list* after the popular pre-World War II Zagreb daily. In the beginning it was more left leaning, but later it became the bastion of neoliberal ideology, which the whole of EPH – half of whose shares Pavić later sold to German publisher WAZ – fiercely supports even today. With its sensationalist headlines, not always reflected in the articles below, *Jutarnji list* has started the ever-faster tabloidisation of the Croatian daily press.

Večernji list followed in its footsteps in 2001, soon after Austrian publisher Styria,

non-profit foundation belonging to the Roman Catholic diocese of Graz-Seckau, had bought it. Shifting its editorial policy from information to infotainment, to make it more similar to *Jutarnji list*, Styria managed to almost halve the daily circulation, from around 220,000 in 2001 to around 13,000 in 2002. Fighting the fall in circulation with ever more infotainment, Styria has sent *Večernji list* on a steady downward path. Styria has also used some of *Večernji list's* capita – shares in the VIPNet telecom company, *Tisak* and *Distri press* distribution companies, as well as several buildings it sold for around 110 million euros, around eight times more than it had paid for *Večernji list*—to finance its new Croatian project, *24 sata*, a small format tabloid. It started in 2005 and sold initially at half a price of regular daily newspapers. When *24 sata* finally became profitable some two years later, *Večernji list* was marginalised within the company. By appointing former Tuđman's press officer and loyalist Miljenko Manjkas as editor in chief, Styria turned *Večernji list* into a right wing tabloid, effectively annihilating whatever remained of its former reliability. When lawsuits for false reporting and slander against the newspaper amassed, Manjkas was replaced. Yet the recovery path was soon stopped by another down-market trend initiated by Styria's executives. Circulation dropped to not more than 60.000, the lowest ever.

The emergence of 'free lance' journalism and the 'de-professionalisation' process

The mid first decade of the 21st century was also the period when both *EPH* and Styria started a new trend in Croatian journalism: replacing professional staff journalists with cheap free lancers. In 1998, when journalists of *Večernji list* were for the first time ever not paid their overtime, the then CEO told the complaining Union representatives that "it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to find 20 children on the street below who would for much less money than you fill those blanks between the adverts". At that time it sounded like a lousy joke; nowadays, it is the reality of Croatian journalism.

Ivo Sanader, prime minister from 2003 until 2009, who is presently being tried for five corruption cases, just before the 2007 parliamentary elections agreed a sort of pact with print media publishers: his government reduced the VAT for print media from 22 to 10 percent and allowed publishers to replace fully employed journalists, with considerably cheaper fake freelancers, people without legal work contracts but still obliged to work like they were fully employed: exclusively for one publisher only, in publishers premises and on publishers equipment, working shifts and permanence, yet without any employment rights but wages. The VAT reduction was officially announced as means to help strengthen the social role of the media, to improve the professional and labour standards in print media and to improve the financial situation of journalists.

The extent of de-professionalisation became obvious in March of 2011, when Styria cancelled the collective agreement for *Večernji list* and its journalists went on strike. Yet, despite all eighty something remaining fully employed journalists (out of around 200 at the time when Styria bought the newspaper) were on strike for 26 days, each and every day of the strike the newspaper appeared on newsstands, thanks to around 120 fake freelancers who were threatened with losing their jobs if they joined the strike. Despite the fact that courts had in several cases already delivered judgments pronouncing such fake free lance status illegal, the government inspection didn't find anything suspicious in *Večernji list*, roving that the pact between the government and the publishers was still stronger than the law.

Today, about 400 journalists in Croatia work under a precarious fake freelance status. Just about the same number of previously fully employed journalists has been sacked in the past 18 months. Among them are some 20 former journalists of *Večernji list* who were transferred in September of 2011 to Styria's new weekly newsmagazine *Forum*. From the very start there were rumours that *Forum* was just a vessel to move another group of fully employed journalists out into the high seas in order to sink them. And despite the fact that *Forum* very soon became highly praised as "the best thing that happened to Croatian journalism in a decade", that is exactly what happened less than 11 months later.

Vjesnik, once a reputable daily, spent the last 20 of its 70 year long history faithfully nurturing Tuđman's, later Sanader's and finally the subsequent prime minister Jadranka Kosor's personality cult, which destroyed any remnants of its reputation beyond recovery. *Vjesnik* became extinct last summer.

Around the same time its publisher also killed *Nacional*, although it was never actually clear who that publisher was. There were rumours one should look for him among the Montenegrin tobacco mafia bosses.

Rumours are still abundant that a third of Pavić's part of the EPH actually belongs to Miroslav Kutle, another murky figure from the privatisation quagmire in the nineties, presently living in Bosnia and Herzegovina as fugitive from Croatian law.

Another daily newspaper, *21. stoljeće*, hit the newsstands just last month, the first after *Jutarnji list* more than 14 years ago. Although there were high hopes that finally a real serious daily newspaper would fill the gap on the Croatian media market, it appeared to be just another tabloid, run by afore mentioned Mr. Kuljiš and his wife. The owner is officially Marjan Jurleka, once editor in chief of *Start* and later one of *Večernji list's* CEOs, but it is still unclear why anyone would risk investing in just another tabloid on a saturated market.

The bad state of Croatian print media – is there a light at the end of the tunnel?

Just as ownership of Croatian media is not always clear, unclear are also the circulation figures. Publishers declare the printed and sold numbers to the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, but it has no means of verification. So there are also rumours about money laundering being involved in the print media business.

Extreme dissatisfaction with Croatian print media was one of the causes why last summer's Green Academy, organised by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung on the Croatian island of Vis, had the media situation on its programme. The special advisor to the minister of Culture in charge of media', the first one in Croatian history, Milan F. Živković also attended. He expressed keen interest in re-establishing quality journalism in order to help the democratic system to function properly.

Journalists and the deputy minister continued meeting and discussing the ways forward after returning home, expanding the discussion to a mailing list and attracting ever more journalists who wanted to contribute. Four working groups have been formed: one for changing and improving media laws, one for media taxation (publishers have in the meantime presented another proposal of VAT reduction to 5 percent, despite breaking all obligations from the previous tax-cut), one for resolving

the problems with the fake freelance status and one for media cooperatives. Panels to be held on the premises of the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND) are also being prepared. The first one, on the fake free lance status, already took place, in presence of top Croatian judges and lawyers, who all agreed that this practice is illegal and should be sanctioned. Representatives of the inspection refused to attend, but the minister of Culture, Ms Andrea Zlatar Viočić, has later summoned the representatives of all the stakeholders in this matter, including the inspection, to her office. As I write, the meeting is yet to take place.

Croatian print journalism is still deep within the tunnel, even though a faint light at its end seemed to be emerging. The outcome depended on the determination of the government to take a stand for the interest of the public to be properly informed, and on that of journalists to be willing to satisfy this interest professionally. Yet this determination still seems to be lacking after all. At the end of the first December week minister Zlatar Viočić suddenly dismissed Živković. She did that after a rather cunning game in which tabloids deliberately misinterpreted his idea to replace the present TV tax with one similar to Finnish media tax. It would have been used not only for public electronic media, but also for portals, print and non-profit media of public interest, which would not have been favourable for the EPH-Styria duopoly. The fact that Zlatar Viočić bowed to pressure of those two seems to suggest that even the present government adheres to "pacta sunt servanda", when it comes to the before mentioned Sander's 2007 pact with publishers.

Stojan de Prato (Rijeka, 1957) worked for *Večernji list*, Croatian daily newspaper, from 1984 until 2011, of which last 9.5 years as Brussels based EU correspondent and before that as Middle East specialist. From September 2011 until April 2012 he commented on European affairs from a Croatian perspective for the now extinct *Forum* weekly newsmagazine. From 1981 until 1984 he taught Hebrew to students of General Linguistics and Oriental Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Zagreb, Croatia. In 2008 he received the Schuman Award for print media reporting on EU affairs, jointly awarded by the then Delegation of the European Commission to Croatia and the Croatian Journalists Association. Presently he is unemployed, but freelances as Croatian national editor for standard Eurobarometer reports (since 2004) and consultant. He is fully fluent in Croatian and English, pretty fluent in Hebrew and Slovenian, somewhat fluent in German, Dutch and French and basically literate in Arabic.



© Stojan de Prato