The Media in Dark Times
A View of the Media in Serbia

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It is the opinion of many that the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the present bloody war would not have been possible without the propaganda role of the state media, particularly radio and television. A monopoly of information already existed in its fullest form in Tito’s Yugoslavia. Then too there were ‘black lists’ of banned personalities and an index of prohibited subjects. No criticism was allowed of Tito himself or his actions, the Yugoslav national army, the communist system, self-management or brotherly unity. It is true that in some of its features, Yugoslav communism was more liberal than that of Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union and that there was an occasional relaxation of censorship and party control, but there was never a moment when the media was free to act without ideological pressure.

Having lost its ideological basis after the collapse of the Great Eastern Empire of communism, the ruling oligarchy took on nationalism as its new ideology. In Serbia, this conversion took place through what was known as the anti-bureaucratic revolution’, which represented an introduction to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, but about the same time prefigured a gory venture into war. All the worst features of the old regime were passed on: demagogy, manipulation of people and ideas, the use of force against the truth, an Orwellian twisting of the meaning of words. People spoke of peace when they meant war, cited justice while setting up a system of gross injustice. Truth became another name for lies and life was praised by glorifying death. A total monopoly of information existed at the time. State radio, television, and ‘Politika’, the daily newspaper with the widest circulation, were totally and without exception in the service of the ruling party, the mouthpieces of its policies. This period will also be remembered as a time when the names of ‘traitors’, ‘fifth columnists’ and ‘defectors’ appeared almost daily in radio and television programmes and the newspapers, meaning all who opposed the programmes and principles which were leading Serbia towards international isolation and internal economic collapse, under the risky and anachronistic dictum that all Serbs must live in one state. The process of democracy in Serbia would undoubtedly have led to the same process in other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Movements and upheavals in its largest and most populated republic decided not only the continued survival of the common homeland but the political future of the entire Balkans. To make a national ‘awakening of the people’ the cornerstone of the new policy, giving it precedence over democratic change, meant opting for a new totalitarianism, for a future full of uncertainty in lands of mixed religion, nationalities and culture. All that had hitherto and from every point of view been a happy circumstance, a variety producing many attractive features, became at the moment of this
unfortunate political choice a huge nightmare, an ugly dream which turned into a still uglier reality.

The state media was given the go-ahead in order to implement this policy. This was a major test of the honesty of each individual journalist working in current affairs programmes, as the political bosses demanded total obedience to the crass violation of the professorial code and complete betrayal of the profession. The national interest, as it figured in the minds of those in power, became the only value system. ‘If it is in the interest of the nation, then you should lie!’ These are the words of a well-known journalist and writer close to the structures of power and the places from which information and the journalistic conscience are directed. Between then and now, not much has occurred to change this principle of professional ethics. In fact, behaviour has to a great extent become more glaringly crass, without any pretence of morality. ‘We have the power and we can do what we like’, is how the official position of the state media is expressed, briefly and to the point, with clarity and precision.

A study which monitored Serbian Television’s news broadcasts over a continuous extended period from summer 1992 to spring 1993 shows that the abuse of image and word occurs most frequently in editing, in the ordering of news items, in incomplete or abridged versions of events, the recital of half-truths or total untruths and a particular form of commentary, whose main purpose is to blacken the political opponent while stepping up the war propaganda and national intolerance. This policy has succeeded in creating certain stereotypes which have become part of public opinion, accepted and respected by the viewing public. Among such stereotypes are: Croats are a genocidal people. Muslims fake attacks on themselves and their own places of worship in order to attract foreign intervention. News of the bombardment of cities, especially Sarajevo is untrue. Serbia’s isolation is the result of an international conspiracy headed by Germany, the Comintern, the Vatican and international Zionism. Opposition leaders work for foreign intelligence services. The sanctions against Serbia are the work of its enemies and the beginning of the end of the United Nations.

Each news-cast, item of information, commentary, documentary or report must be presented within the frame-work of these ‘truths’ which have acquired the force of the Ten Commandments.

Any study of the influence of the media in Serbia on the forming of public opinion is to a great extent linked to the effect of RTV Serbia (RTS) and the way in which it acts. The broadcast range of these state institutions covers the entire area of the present Yugoslavia and a good part of the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Newspaper circulation at a time of great economic crisis, paper shortages and the great impoverishment of the population, has fallen drastically. People talk and write of the death of the press in Yugoslavia. In circumstances such as these state radio — and television particularly — have a total monopoly of information and an absolute effect on the audience. They