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# TAILORING MEDIA CONTENT IN B&H THE GATEKEEPERS ARE IN US



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# TAILORING MEDIA CONTENT IN B&H THE GATEKEEPERS ARE IN US

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In 1995, after the end of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina passed modern media legislation and achieved high media pluralism. These were the times when the country was under the heavy influence of the international community, primarily the United States and European Union, which led the peacekeeping and state-building process. Physical assaults on journalists and even political pressure were not frequent and, according to Reporters without Borders surveys, B&H ranked high in media freedom in the 2002-2010 period. However, the positive ratings were a reflection of the existence of formal regulations and lack of open pressure. So-called indirect pressure that affects media content has always been present and, as a result of the deterioration of the economic and political situation in the country over the last five years, has flourished.

Many media analysts claim that media freedom in B&H is absolute. There is virtually no field which at least in one part of the country is not totally open to various discussions, criticism and praise. However, the deeply divided public, ethnically diverse and territorial, lacks a constant in terms of content. What is appropriate for criticism in one part of the country is not appropriate in another. Who and from which part of the country will criticize someone depends on political views on history or on the ethnic background of actors of events. Everyone has their ethnic favorites and their views of history and the country's future.

The Constitution of B&H, like the constitutions of its entities, specifically contains a provision according to which "the rights and freedoms set forth in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and its Protocols shall apply directly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These shall have priority over all other law"<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, any local legal act which is in contravention of the European Convention will be invalid, which is a great democratic achievement.

There is no law on blasphemy in B&H. Furthermore, not a single law or document specifically lays out restricting elements that protect national security with respect to media.

Two documents that regulate media conduct and professionalism are the *Code on Audiovisual and Radio Media Services*<sup>2</sup> and the *Press Code*. The former code very specifically and extensively prescribes media freedoms for broadcasters and lays down a number of restrictions pertaining to protection of minors, pornography, quackery, false content, protection of privacy, incitement to crimes and hate speech.

In June 2017, the Council of Ministers of B&H developed the Proposal of the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina which defines the notion of public incitement to violence and hate. It states that whoever through media, social networks and public gatherings or in another way publicly incites or calls for violence and hate directed against a group or member of such group based on race, skin color, religion, origin or national or ethnic background, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or any other trait shall be punished by imprisonment for a term no less than one year. The proposal of the law was developed due to tremendous escalation of hate speech on the internet in recent years. The proposal also contains a paragraph stating that imprisonment may be pronounced on anyone who approves or glorifies the crimes of genocide as defined by international judgments. There is political agreement in B&H regarding the first part of the proposal. However, it is uncertain

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<sup>1</sup>Constitution of B&H, Article 2, paragraph 2

<sup>2</sup><http://rak.ba/bos/index.php?uid=1324649058>

if the law will be approved by the B&H Parliament because the Serb and Croat representatives believe that Bosniaks, as the biggest victims of the war in B&H, will abuse the provisions of the law and try to include under it many things that fall under stand on the war and crimes, on which there is no consent in B&H.

### **Self-censorship – do not rub “your side”, bosses or advertisers the wrong way**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a deeply divided country, primarily between the two entities and then also ethnically and after that politically. That is reflected in the media sphere. As a result of this kind of social environment, political clientelism in the media is dominant. It is based on some sort of self-censorship by owners, editors and journalists. Self-censorship is to a considerable extent a result of an individual’s conviction that the view of their ethnic group is correct, which is not always necessarily true. This conviction in the news business may be reflected through unprofessional media production – selection of information, emphasis on issues that confirm the group’s views, or negative comments about those whom the dominant national policy considers opponents. These methods are sometimes not easy to identify and, unlike other manipulative methods such as defamation and especially inaccurate information, are difficult to address through media regulation or self-regulation. That is precisely why numerous media outlets in B&H claim they are objective because, for example, they give everyone an opportunity to say something. Of course they do. But in what way and in what context?

For Sarajevo-based journalist Almir Panjeta, the biggest threat to media freedom in B&H is the lack of free, or even any kind of, expression.

“People are increasingly hesitant to express their views on anything, to have and to express a clear opinion on certain topics, out of fear of public misunderstanding and public condemnation, regardless of how banal a topic they express themselves about may be. Self-censorship has ‘swallowed’ nearly all free-thinking authors. People write in a way that will not rub anyone the wrong way or in a way that will keep the degree of displeasure as low as possible, and so there is less and less threat and more and more accomplishment of restriction of freedom of expression in B&H,” said Panjeta in a survey on media freedom carried out by Sarajevo-based Media Center<sup>3</sup>.

Belma Buljubasic, University of Sarajevo journalism professor, thinks that ethnic self-censorship is quite present in B&H. “Media are divided along ethnic lines. I actually don’t know a single media outlet that is common to all citizens of B&H. It’s enough to look at the manner in which they report on anniversaries of deaths and commemorations,” said Buljubasic in an interview for our report.

“Self-censorship is likely the biggest problem of the media landscape,” maintains a former member of the public service RTV FB&H Steering Board, Igor Soldo. “Poor financial situation, lack of transparency of ownership in the media landscape, launching certain media outlets just for the purpose of promoting specific policies or projects and big influence of

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<sup>3</sup> Politički pritisci i ekonomska nesigurnost najveće prepreke slobodi medija u BiH i regiji  
<http://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/politicki-pritisci-i-ekonomska-nesigurnost-najvece-prepreke-slobodi-medija-u-bih>

advertisers and political subjects on media owners and management structures create a lot of pressure on journalists. Faced with all of these problems, few journalists decide to oppose censorship or avoid self-censorship. This has particularly been true for private media, but in recent years it has been pronounced without exception for all media, even public,” said Soldo.

Amir Suzanj, editor of public BH Radio 1, says the media landscape in B&H generally mirrors society. “The media staffing policy is seriously jeopardized and people who ‘strayed into journalism’ have come to many media. Fully aware of their deep shortcomings, they agree to be political puppets of those they serve. In this situation, self-censorship is a key element of their work, which most certainly reflects on the quality of media content. Besides an evident inability to professionally look at events and processes in society, these ‘journalists’ try at every opportunity not to confront the centers they serve and thus self-censorship is not just a big barrier in their work; it is also the philosophy of their media action. Nevertheless, a certain number of journalists in B&H’s media landscape remain highly professional and without hesitation evaluate processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” Amir Suzanj told us.

### **Material interest – media are a business above all**

There will always be tension in journalism between a desire for profit and the ethical mandate to work in the public interest, although this profession must sometimes seek a compromise between these two obligations. An ideal society is a society of compromise. Thus, loyalty to funders may clash with obligations to other interests. As journalism professor Stjepan Malovic has pointed out several times, since the end of the 1990s, looking at the media landscape in South East Europe, the problem has no longer been pressure by politicians, which the media and journalists are able to resist with effort and help from the international community, as well as with personal and professional sacrifice. Difficulties appear with new centers of power: advertisers, multinational media corporations, collusion of financial institutions with politicians. These new types of pressure on media are not as visible and evident as pressure by politicians. The new collusions are much more subtle, less conspicuous, often unfamiliar to the public, and are perceived in the subtle preference for worldviews offered by financial centers of power<sup>4</sup>.

Changes in the media are evident: tabloidization and infotainment prevail, media are ceding space to advertisers, while new media products first meet advertising needs and only then is the content “tailored.” The public was not aware of this new threat for a long time.

Speaking of pressure on the media in B&H, another one of many paradoxes is present. Even cursory surveys confirm that economic pressure on the media in B&H is politically motivated. Hence the paradox of attempts to define political and economic interest in B&H. Economic pressure on the media in B&H is basically used as a tool for achieving certain political goals. In the West it is the other way around. There, political pressure is a tool for economic control and subjugation, i.e. for acquiring profit and wealth. As B&H media analyst Dusan Babic has

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<sup>4</sup> Malovic Stjepan, *Ekonomski pritisci na medije* (Economic Pressures on Media) *PRAVA IGRA TEK POČINJE* (THE REAL GAME IS JUST STARTING), part of the book “Medijska spoticanja u vremenu tranzicije” (Stumbling of the Media in Times of Transition) (2005), editor Udovicic Radenko.

written<sup>5</sup>, the primary lever used for achieving specific political, economic and other interests is manipulation and instrumentalization of public opinion with the goal of acquiring legitimacy and legality for concrete political programs. This is articulated most efficiently through the media, but the problem is always the lack of political correctness in the articulation of such interests. In order for a specific interest group to take control of the media, or at least to have influence on the media, it must possess political, economic and other power. Modern history confirms that economic and financial power is far more efficient than simple physical force and compulsion. Thus, economic and financial pressure is a proven tool of political and all other disciplining. From a functional point of view, political power is actually transformed economic and financial power<sup>6</sup>.

In this regard, the editor of the online magazine Zurnal.info, Eldin Karic, believes that the biggest threat to freedom of expression and the media is money conditioned by political interests.

“The problem is money controlled by government and institutions of the system. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 million marks is distributed to the media annually, through various levels of government. Not a single fening has gone into independent media, rather being spent with a political background,” said Karic for Media Center’s survey on freedom of the media<sup>7</sup>.

Meanwhile, international donors on the other hand support local so-called independent media (sometimes opposition media too), which are supposed to promote western values and combat nationalism and ethnic divisions. A progressive and noble idea, but such civic media do not always enjoy the support of the ethnic majorities in B&H and thus have less influence. Therefore, although these are official donations, they too have conditions related to program, or otherwise they would not be received.

As public BH Radio 1 editor Amir Suzanj said in an interview for this report, most media in B&H, both broadcast and print, are not conditioned only by specific interest groups, primarily political ones, but are rather in an inadmissibly large number mouthpieces of these centers. “This is particularly pronounced with print media, especially some dailies, which are merely a channel of communication for specific interest groups. That is certainly the result of the very complex political situation, but to a large extent also of the situation in the media. Journalists often work in conditions that might be called blackmail, due to which some of them readily agree to serve these centers. A certain number of media outlets are funded by political parties and specific economic groups and therefore cannot be anything but mouthpieces of their media tutors,” said Suzanj.

Belma Buljubasic, journalism professor at the University of Sarajevo, believes that both advertisers and politicians influence media content. “Of course, there is both direct and indirect pressure. We don’t have a law on transparency of ownership and thus we often don’t

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<sup>5</sup> Babic Dusan, *Ekonomski pritisci na medije u BiH: INSTRUMENT POSTIZANJA POLITIČKIH CILJEVA* (Economic Pressure on the Media in B&H: A TOOL FOR ACHIEVING POLITICAL GOALS).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Politički pritisci i ekonomska nesigurnost najveće prepreke slobodi medija u BiH i regiji  
<http://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/politicki-pritisci-i-ekonomska-nesigurnost-najvece-prepreke-slobodi-medija-u-bih>

even know who the media owners are. Further, the connection between politicians, advertisers and media owners is often very strong, i.e. they have the same political or economic goals, or both. Advertisers often have influence on the media agenda. They actually strengthen self-censorship and censorship among journalists and editors because media existence often depends on advertisers and thus all scandals in which advertisers are involved are covered up through the media,” Buljubasic told us.

Igor Soldo, former Steering Board member of the public service Radio and Television of the B&H Federation, maintains that media editorial policies are almost entirely conditioned by the stands of owners, advertisers and state founders. “This is observed through the avoidance of certain topics or the way they are covered. Private media don’t differ much in this regard from those founded by one of the various levels of government. Perhaps the most characteristic example are internet portals, which were mostly founded indirectly or directly by various interest groups and which, due to non-transparent ownership, are able to publish without accountability everything that their owners or funders need. And to defend or attack whoever is necessary using all available means,” we were told by Igor Soldo, who has been an employee of the Central Bank of B&H for years. His opinion is that the Central Bank has extremely professional and unconditional cooperation with the media, but he allows for the possibility that certain commercial banks through marketing contracts try to achieve influence on the media. This issue was extensively covered in 2010 by Slobodna Bosna, then the best known B&H weekly, claiming that UniCredit Bank had cancelled marketing contracts with the paper due to the fact that it had reported critically on certain events and people who are close to the bank or whom the bank was financially supporting as part of its socially responsible business activities.

Additionally, private media are most exposed to economic pressure when state institutions, state companies and political parties decide where to advertise. It is evident in each ethnic community that they give to “their” media, and then within “their” media they seek those that are more politically suitable. Dnevni Avaz had for years received tremendous funds from state advertisers. After its owner Fahrudin Radoncic founded his own political party, a portion of these funds disappeared. While the author of this article was a member of the RTV FBiH Steering Board, this media organization constantly had to balance between companies close to the two strongest parties based in Sarajevo – SDA and SDP – in order to keep marketing contracts. There were cases when BH Telecom would refuse to extend a contract due to a critically intoned item on the 60 Minutes show. Or the other way around, the show’s editor was once suppressed by management from releasing something until a contract was signed. Basically, in B&H such economic pressure on the media is often politically motivated. Nevertheless, there are also cases of more or less pure economic pressure in the form of insistence on support or at least lack of criticism. Commercial companies do not do this only through advertising blackmail; they often also target journalists who agree for a small fee, due to low salaries, to write articles or make items which have promotional elements. This is difficult to detect and difficult to prove. For example, ten or so years ago the news program of the public service BHRT imposed a ban on airing items about commercial companies in the primetime news program, supposedly because they directly or indirectly promote their business. The rule was not in effect for long because if a company hires 50 people, that is important news and cannot be ignored. Editors have an obligation to prevent possible enormous praise or promotion.

However, the problem is that, for money, some news media are willing to publish content in regular news sections, without marking it as paid content. From my own experience, this



practice was used (and likely it is still used) by the most popular news media outlet Klix, news daily Dnevni Avaz and social and entertainment magazine Gracija. Many media experts claim this practice is used by the majority of media outlets! An exception are public broadcasting services, as well as Al Jazeera and N1, two foreign news stations backed by foreign capital, where newsworthiness is not sold in “grocery-store fashion.” This demonstrates a total collapse of media credibility and some new concepts of the combination of providing news, promotion and propaganda (which the public evidently accepts). Among ordinary people one can often hear that they receive information from the media with reservation or they do not trust them at all. No serious surveys, that show the degree of trust in media, have been conducted recently, but the results would likely be devastating.

The old ideal that media should be beyond control and influence has become virtually an absurdity in B&H conditions. Independent media are supposed to be the ones whose editorial policies are not susceptible to influence and which create their program contents guided primarily by professional journalistic norms. However, such media are in vast minority. And they are usually at the mercy of advertisers or of tremendous, mostly successful, pressure by public founders, or to be more specific, politicians.

If it is in conformity with majority public opinion or influential political and economic factors, a media outlet, in other words its owners – or if it is a public media outlet then the director – and also indirectly its editors, may benefit. That was especially evident in recent years in relation to the three services operating as part of the Public Broadcasting System of B&H. In the Republika Srpska, according to Media Plan Institute monitorings<sup>8</sup>, RTRS produces a program that overwhelmingly sides with the ruling coalition, or better said, with the strongest party. That is logical in a way since the ruling elite considers RTRS a state-forming element. In the Federation of B&H, ruling and opposition parties have not viewed the public services as their child, but as a danger that jeopardizes their positions by critical reporting. That has resulted in negative audit reports, the rejection of project technical assistance for new facilities and centers, tacit pressure on steering board members (especially those who came to these positions thanks to their lobbying). In these ‘games,’ not even directors and editors-in-chief could emerge totally innocent and objective. When one political current is not satisfied with reporting by the public service, it is willing to do anything to completely destroy it. Absolutely destructive action beyond any political reason and logic. If something collapses, then it cannot be controlled. The price for that is now being paid especially by the two Sarajevo-based public services. Due to political disagreements among ethnically divided parties, they have no legal way to collect the RTV subscription tax and there is no hope in sight to find a solution, which leads to the disappearance of public broadcasting on the foundations that existed in the last 15 years.

Public service editor Amir Suzanj says he is not in a position to attend meetings of members of BHRT management structures with political officials and party representatives and thus cannot claim that BHRT is suffering open political pressure. “The fact is – and independent monitoring and analyses also show it – that BHRT is considered the organization with the

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<sup>8</sup> Assessment of Political Diversity in Media Reporting 2014 General Elections - Bosnia and Herzegovina  
<https://mediaplaninstitut.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/finalreporten.pdf>

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most professional content in terms of political pressure, which means that journalists even today resist political attempts to take control of their program. Nevertheless, unwillingness on the part of Parliament and political parties to resolve the issue of BHRT's stable funding is beyond doubt a kind of political pressure on this media organization. Furthermore, I cannot claim that some editors do not encounter attempts by certain political centers to influence the program, but that, at least on the screen and behind microphones, has not yet taken a shape that would be worrisome. I think the situation with us is much better than with the entity public broadcasters which are partly, and RTRS completely, mouthpieces of political centers," said Amir Suzanj.

Igor Soldo says that, while he was a member of the Federation of B&H RTV Steering Board, the pressure was constant and uncompromised. "The strongest pressure came from advertisers, i.e. their representatives and advocates, and also from various political subjects – parties as well as bodies and institutions in B&H. There have even been attempts of unlawful removal of Steering Board members, as well as unconstitutional and unlawful imposition of various legal and staffing solutions, all caused by the refusal to side with specific political groups," said the former member of the Steering Board.

### **Is there hope?**

How can these things be fought and how can they be overcome? Very hard. Self-censorship is tied to deep ethnic and political preferences that exist in B&H. This problem can only be solved with the thawing of the overall ethno-national and political conflicts in B&H. The situation is not heading in that direction at the moment.

A western solution for combating clientelism is the constructive education of journalism students to enter the profession with more awareness and responsibility. However, here are several elements of the quantitative situation with this type of education that were published in a Media Initiatives analysis of the education of journalists in B&H<sup>9</sup>.

Every year, a total of 465 future journalists, i.e. those who want to become professional communicators, enroll in six public and two private university departments. The number of those who graduate every year, depending on the department, is from 30 to 70 percent of final year students, totaling around 200 students. According to Media Plan Institute estimates, an equal number of students from other university departments decide to try their luck in the fields of journalism and PR. Thus, every year there are formally 400 people on the market who seek or would be able to perform the job of professional communicators. With such heavy competition, it is very difficult to find a job. These young people, even if they do find it, will agree, regardless of what kind of education they have, to political compromises in newsrooms or to serve political goals of media outlets, as they will have low salaries (only three media outlets, all of them foreign, pay above the average salary in B&H – more than 420 Euros a month). This does not include editors-in-chief. Many of them will be willing - for one hundred marks - to tailor an article at least a little bit with the aim of promoting a company or its PR activities.

The number of journalism faculties or journalism departments is not a result of th

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<sup>9</sup> Media Literacy and Education needs of journalists and the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina - **TWO SIDES OF THE MEDIA MEDAL** <http://mediaonline.ba/en/?ID=3416>

e real needs of media outlets and communication institutions, but a consequence of the country's atomization into entities and cantons, and, even more, of the country's ethnic fragmentation. One might say that every government, i.e. every political structure, is educating "its" journalists for itself.

When asked whether the academic education of journalists can strengthen ethical norms so that future journalists are less susceptible to external demands and pressure, journalism professor Belma Buljubasic said there is a difference between what students study in theory and what happens in practice. "For editors, journalists are expendable goods, as awful as this term may sound. To decrease spending, they employ unqualified labor force and violate ethical principles. Journalists' existence is jeopardized and they often reluctantly agree to owners' demands so as not to be fired, although they are underpaid," said Buljubasic.

The conclusion may be that progress can be achieved in this field with more political tolerance and more money (one often causes or generates the other). We are currently not heading in the direction of increasing either one. The only worse thing would be if we stopped fighting for that.

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